INTERSECTIONS OF GENRE AND MODE:

AUTHENTICITY, FRAGILITY, AND IDENTIFICATION IN WORDSWORTH'S

LYRICAL BALLADS (1800)

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by

MELANIE PAVAO

Dr. Noah Heringman, Thesis Supervisor

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To my parents, who many years ago,
stepped on a plane in search of a better life
and have since
given me everything I ever dreamed of
and more
than I could ever have imagined.

The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the thesis entitled

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LYRICAL BALLADS (1800)

presented by Melanie Pavao,

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and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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Professor Noah Heringman

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Professor Lily-Gurton-Wachter

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Professor Theodore Koditschek

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate the ways in which Wordsworth's

poems in the 1800 edition of *Lyrical Ballads* draw upon elements of the ballad and

pastoral traditions. By drawing upon these elements, in addition to employing the

"language of men" and "low and rustic life", Wordsworth reveals the fragility of a

common way of life, and mourns its loss. Furthermore, the language of men attempts to

make this fragility a problem with which all readers can identify.

In each chapter, I describe the genre and modal influences reflected in the poems

chosen for examination. In the first chapter, I discuss poems primarily viewed as ballads

in the collection, specifically "Poor Susan" and "The Idiot Boy". In the second chapter, I

discuss poems in the *Lyrical Ballads* that have been traditionally viewed as pastorals,

namely "Michael" and "The Brothers". First, I discuss "Michael" in its earliest form, as a

"pastoral ballad", and demonstrate the ways in which the ballad influenced the final poem

even though it ultimately took the form of blank verse. Then, I discuss "The Brothers",

and demonstrate the ways in which both the ballad and pastoral influenced the poem.

Finally, in the third chapter I analyze a sequence of poems in the collection. This

methodology attempts to do justice to the collection's order, as the poems are set in a

specific order for a specific reason. I look at the influences upon the sequence of ballads

("The Two Thieves, or the last Stage of Avarice", "A whirl-blast from behind the hill",

"Song for the Wandering Jew", "Ruth"), and argue that they all reveal fragility and

uncertainty about the future of their way of life, parallel to the fragility of oral tradition.

Introduction

In the Spring of 1798, two companions, William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, set off on a set of walking tours with William's sister, Dorothy. In order to supplement the cost of these tours, Wordsworth and Coleridge decided to send a poem to the *New Monthly Magazine*. The poem they composed was "The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere", of which Wordsworth admits that "much the greatest part of the story was Mr. Coleridge's invention; but certain parts I suggested" (Butler and Green 4). The poem quickly grew "till it became too important for our first object which was limited to our expectation of five pounds, and we began to talk of a volume, which was to consist…of Poems chiefly on supernatural subjects taken from common life but looked at, as much as might be, through an imaginative medium" (4). Both authors intended to contribute equally to the volume, but as Coleridge later described in his *Biographia Literaria*, "…Mr. Wordsworth's industry…proved so much more successful, and the number of his poems so much greater, than my compositions, instead of forming a balance, appeared rather an interpolation of heterogeneous matter" (8). While the claim that the final volume appeared as "heterogeneous matter" is contentious, and will be opposed in this analysis, Wordsworth's poems certainly made up the majority of the 1798 and subsequent editions of *Lyrical Ballads*.[1]

The publication of the volume happened quickly – its poems were composed by the middle of spring of that year, and Joseph Cottle of Bristol, a friend of Coleridge's, agreed to publish the volume. Wordsworth and Coleridge offered several proposals, and finally agreed upon one in late May 1798. Cottle agreed to publish a collection of ballads

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[1] In the 1798 edition, Wordsworth made nineteen contributions while Coleridge made only four.

as well as some other poems, and the volume would appear anonymously, as, according to Coleridge, "Wordsworth's name is nothing – and to a large number of persons mine *stinks*" (Butler and Green 12). The typesetting began almost immediately, and by late August 1798 the entire volume was ready for binding (14-15). But, at the last minute Cottle decided not to publish the book himself due to impending financial difficulties and poor prospects for the volume's sales. The details become more confusing at this point – in short, a number of London publishers were approached, and, probably without the authors being aware of who would publish the volume, it appeared in London bookshops on October 4, 1798, its title bearing the imprint of J. & A. Arch, an obscure London publishing firm (15).

In addition to the collection of poems, Wordsworth and Coleridge inserted an "Advertisement" describing the endeavor at the beginning of the 1798 volume. The purpose of the advertisement seems to be not only a description, but perhaps also an apology for the collection of poems. "The majority of the following poems are to be considered as experiments," the authors wrote: "They were written chiefly with a view to ascertain how far the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society is adapted to the purposes of poetic pleasure" (Gamer and Porter 47).   The authors anticipate possible objections to their poetic endeavor: "Readers of superior judgment may disapprove of the style in which many of these pieces are executed; it must be expected that many lines and phrases will not exactly suit their taste" (47). Apart from this notably ambiguous purpose ("to ascertain how far the language of the conversation in the middle and lower classes…"), the authors make an effort to note the ways in which the poems find their origins in real facts – the poem "Goody Blake and Harry Gill", for

instance, is based upon "a well-authenticated fact", and the other poems in the collection,

if not "absolute inventions of the author," were based upon "facts which took place

within his personal observation or that of his friends" (48). Thus, from the very first

page, the authors make the reader aware of the ways in which the poems in the collection

draw upon the ballad tradition. The poems use the language of the "middle and lower

classes of society" a common attribute of the ballad, and are based on "well-authenticated

facts" or "observations", another important aspect of the ballad tradition.

    Reviews of the 1798 edition of *Lyrical Ballads* were varied, the most notable

being the negative ones by Charles Burney and Robert Southey. Burney refused to allow

the volume the recognition of being "poetry":

> Though we have been extremely entertained with the fancy, the facility, and (in
> general) the sentiments of these pieces, we cannot regard them as *poetry*, of a
> class to be cultivated at the expence of a higher species of versification, unknown
> in our language at the time when our elder writers, whom this author condescends
> to imitate, wrote their ballads. (Gamer and Porter 156)

Burney was clearly unimpressed by the influence of the ballad tradition and the ballad

imitations included in the volume. Southey, on the other hand, took issue principally

with the "low and rustic" subjects of the poems: "The 'experiment,' we think, has failed,

not because the language of conversation is little adapted to the 'purposes of poetic

pleasure,' but because it has been tried upon uninteresting subjects" Southey wrote in the

Critical Review. "Yet", he continued" "every piece discovers genius; and, ill as the

author has frequently employed his talents, they certainly rank him with the best of living

poets" (149-150). Southey thus conceded Wordsworth's poetic ability in the review,

even if he was uninterested in its subjects – something about Wordsworth's talent

intrigued him nonetheless.

The first edition of *Lyrical Ballads* sold reasonably well – by June of 1800, Wordsworth wrote to his brother: "The first edition of the Lyrical Ballads is sold off" (Butler and Green 25-27). In the same month, Longman had agreed to publish a second edition, and Cottle was again commissioned to print the volume. The new edition was to include a second volume of new poems, as well as a "Preface" preceding both volumes. In the first volume, only Wordsworth's "The Convict" was withdrawn, and Coleridge's "Love" was added in its place. However, significant changes were made in the order of the poems; most importantly, Wordsworth moved Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancyent Marinere" from the beginning of the first volume to the near end – just before Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey".

The publishing process of the second edition, which was printed over six months, was plagued by Coleridge's unfinished intended contributions. For instance, as early as October 1800, the authors decided to withdraw Coleridge's "Christabel", as it was still incomplete, and replaced it with Wordsworth's pastoral "Michael", an important addition, especially in the context of this analysis. The second edition was finally fully printed at the end of 1800. The third edition was published soon thereafter, in June 1802, and fourth appeared in 1805.

The Preface to the second edition, written by Wordsworth, was especially notable for its attempt to explain the purpose of the *Lyrical Ballads*. In it, Wordsworth describes the aim and methods of the collection, which appear more clearly in this formulation but also take on a different direction in the second edition. He writes,

> The principal object then which I proposed to myself in these Poems was to make the incidents of common life interesting by tracing in them, truly though not ostentatiously, the primary laws of our nature: chiefly as far as regards the manner in which we associate ideas in a state of excitement. Low and rustic life was

generally chosen because in that situation the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language…and lastly, because in that situation the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature. (Gamer and Porter 173-4)

Here, Wordsworth describes his poetic aim for the collection, that is, "to make the incidents of common life interesting, by tracing in them truly though not ostentatiously, the primary laws of our nature" (Gamer and Porter 174). In order to achieve this, he decides to depict "low and rustic life" because it is the setting in which human life is best represented: "in that situation the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity" (174). This style of poetry differs greatly from the more highly regarded forms of the eighteenth century, such as the epic or the elegy. Instead of aspiring to and illustrating higher forms and subjects, he draws poetic language and subjects from common ways of life. The "plainer language" that farmers and shepherds use reveals more about the workings of human nature than a high language could. Also, Wordsworth shows his interest in the way that human emotions and passions are "incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature" – arguing that there is something more authentic about the way that those closer to nature express their emotions. Rather than focus on poetic forms, Wordsworth chooses to develop a poetics around his own perceptions and experiences with rural life.

The aim of the second edition seems quite removed from that outlined in the Advertisement of 1798. The title, *Lyrical Ballads*, also seems out of place, as, unlike the Advertisement, the Preface makes little mention of the ballad tradition that the Advertisement made a point to include. On the one hand, we can simply take the view that Wordsworth's aim in the 1800 edition of *Lyrical Ballads* was much different from

that of the two poets in the 1798 edition. Wordsworth had wanted to change the title of the 1800 edition of *Lyrical Ballads* to *Poems*; however, the publishers would not allow it (Beer 8), and Jordan notes that it was likely the two authors were simply "seeking a novel and descriptive title for their little book" (177). Further evidence of the change in direction for the second edition is not only apparent by this wish to change the title, but also Wordsworth's rearrangement of the poems. Most noticeably, Wordsworth moved Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere" from the beginning of the collection (1798 edition) to the penultimate spot in Volume I of the 1800 edition. This repositioning of "The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere," a *ballad imitation*, certainly makes us reconsider whether Wordsworth's aim, at this point, was to foreground the ballad tradition at all.

As many critics have noted, Wordsworth's "experiments" are less innovative than he leads us to believe in the Preface to the 1800 edition. De Bolla notes that "the use of the term 'experiment' in relation to poetry was common enough at the time of publication" (45), and Richard Cronin contends that "Experimentalism, like treachery, is a key characteristic of 1798" (5)[2]. Rather, they represent a distinct awareness of poetic tradition – specifically the ballad genre and the pastoral mode. In this thesis, I examine the ways in which these poems draw upon elements of the ballad and pastoral traditions. By doing so, we can more clearly see what Wordsworth achieves when he uses the "language of men" and "low and rustic life." With genre and modal influences in mind,

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[2] Cronin here is also referring to the influences of the French Revolution on both Wordsworth and Coleridge. Peter Jimack describes the French Revolution's influence on the *Lyrical Ballads* by arguing that the volume strives to be essentially "un-French". Nicholas Roe argues that as Wordsworth experienced the French Revolution, his political allegiances changed, which paralleled his changing treatment of human suffering in his writing (126). For a more complete analysis of the influence of the French Revolution on these two authors, see Roe's *Wordsworth and Coleridge: The Radical Years*.

Wordsworth reveals the fragility of a common way of life, and mourns its loss. Furthermore, the language of men attempts to make this fragility a problem with which all readers can identify.

Before examining how these influences manifest themselves in the collection, it is necessary to understand their characteristics, beginning with the ballad tradition. The ballad was experiencing a revival throughout the eighteenth and into the nineteenth centuries. Poets were composing ballad imitations across England, bringing the ballad genre to "literary respectability" (Friedman 259). Collecting and editing ballads was encouraged, and so ballad imitations became prevalent (259).[3] Wordsworth, along with Walter Scott, figures most prominently among these imitators and collectors, and so it is no surprise that his original poetry was influenced by this tradition. The title, *Lyrical Ballads, and other poems*, alludes to the tradition, and, in the 1798 edition, Coleridge's ballad imitation ("The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere") was placed first in the collection. Friedman notes that "Wordsworth's interest in broadsides doubtless affected, if indeed it did not impel, his program for reforming the diction of poetry, for if he were to reach a popular audience, he would be obliged to write 'the real language of men'" (273). Thus, the impact of the ballad tradition not only followed the popular poetry of the day, but also could allow Wordsworth to reach a greater audience.

Wordsworth also demonstrated his awareness of the ballad tradition through a number of his authored poems in the *Lyrical Ballads* written in the ballad form – for instance, "The Idiot Boy", "The Thorn", "The Idle Shepherd Boys", etc. These poems serve as examples of Wordsworth's poems that follow the surface form of the ballad –

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[3] For instance, Scott's *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (1802-3).

most specifically, the ballad stanza. Form is not the only characteristic of the ballad, however – a focus on narrative serves a principal role in the genre as well. Unlike the epic, the ballad narrates selectively, highlighting certain events and leaving out most excess description (Fischer 33). Friedman notes: "Offshoots of the broadside the lyrical ballads assuredly are, but Wordsworth was never so heroically humble and too wise to become a mere broadside hack…By 'lyrical' Wordsworth can only have meant that in his transmutation of the ballad, the emotional, subjective element predominates over the narrative" (274-5). Thus, in Wordsworth's ballads, he often focuses on dramatic and subjective elements instead of mere description of events.

The lack of narrative description in the ballad is also linked to its roots in oral tradition. Most often, listeners would know the story behind the ballad so well (either because they had heard it so many times or because it was authentic, local lore), that more background information would simply be tedious. Jordan notes that the term "ballads" comes with "a suggestion of basis in fact" (183); thus, a final important element of the ballad tradition is the familiarity listeners had with the tales behind the ballads.

The pastoral tradition, on the other hand, is characterized by its perceived inauthenticity. I align myself with Paul Alpers in describing pastoral a "mode" rather than a "genre." Whereas genre is a grouping of literary works based on both common outer and inner forms (45), "mode" describes a certain mood, or, in other words, the "inner form" of a poem (attitude, tone purpose, subject, audience). Alpers makes, clear, however, that we should not view mode and genre as opposed to one another, but rather that mode follows from genre:

> 'Mode' is thus the term that suggests the connection of 'inner' and 'outer' form: it conveys the familiar view that form and content entail each other and cannot,

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finally, be separated…'Mode' is the suitable term for the literary category that includes a number of individual genres, because it is continuous with the idea that a genre is identified by both outer and inner form. (49)

The common features of the mode are an idyllic landscape, landscape as a setting for song, a conscious attention to art and nature, and herdsmen as singers (22) and most scholars agree that the pastoral tradition began with Theocritus and his *Idylls* from the third century B.C. Virgil is also considered one of the first poets to write in this mode with his *Eclogues* from the first century B.C. Alpers names herdsmen[4] and their lives as the representative figures of the pastoral (24), a major focus of many of the poems included in this examination. These subjects were of especial interest to Wordsworth, as many changes characterized the countryside in which he lived – enclosure took much of the commoners' landed property, and landscapes were changing as the common lands began disappearing.[5] Yet, the pastoral mode often found representing these subjects problematic, as its highly stylized form had the tendency to cause its subjects to be portrayed in an almost sentimental, rather than authentic, way.

We should not ignore form – that is, genre and mode – in the *Lyrical Ballads* simply because Wordsworth does not emphasize it in his poetics. In fact, genre and mode are incredibly important to the collection, and, through an examination of the poems with this in mind, we can better understand the purpose and unity of the *Lyrical Ballads*. These represent a hybridization of forms that not only fulfill the goal set in the

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[4] The title of herdsman can also include other similar figures: "Similarly, the dramatis personae of pastoral can be extended to include other rustics or socially inferior persons on the grounds that they are equivalent, in a given society or world, of shepherds, or that they more truly have the representative status that traditional pastoral ascribes to herdsmen" (Alpers 27).

[5] Enclosure was the process of closing in previously common lands and fields for mowing meadows or grazing animals. The people of the countryside previously had access to this land, but as it was enclosure, they faced growing poverty and a changing landscape from that which they had known. For a history of enclosure, see Hammond and Hammonds' *The Village Labourer* and J.M. Neeson's *Commoners: Common Right, Enclosure and Social Change in England 1700-1820*.

Preface (to depict "low and rustic life"), but also reflect the fragility of a common way of life that is slowly disappearing. The hybridization of genre and mode, then, serves as a vehicle to depict this aim.

Genre becomes difficult to define when we talk about Romantic poetry; numerous critics have noted the difficulty of assigning one genre to Romantic poems. Fischer describes the complexity of applying traditional genre distinctions to poetry in this period:

> For this branch of literature there is no binding terminology and there are no actual genre regulations…While within the genre it did happen that successful works inspired imitation and initiated fashionable trends…this was offset by the general tendency of the age towards originality and independent development of ideas from other sources, even to the extent of producing something so different that the original genre was only detectable as a remote influence. (2)

David Duff calls this "smooth-mixing" – that is, "the seamless fusion of forms typically associated with biological metaphors of organic unity" (*Romanticism* 165). It is difficult for us to pick apart the parts of the poem in which the pastoral marks a greater influence than the ballad, and vice versa, because in fact they both influence many of these poems at the same time. This happens most clearly in Wordsworth's poems in blank verse, notably "Michael" and "The Brothers", the focal points of Chapter Two.

In each chapter of this thesis, I describe the genre and modal influences reflected in the poems chosen for examination. I also examine other influences, including real-life events, on the poems, because of their important function of authentication in light of the Preface. In the first chapter, I discuss poems primarily viewed as ballads in the collection, specifically "Poor Susan" and "The Idiot Boy". I chose these specific poems because of their anti-ballad-like qualities (which will be defined in Chapter One). On the one hand, their outward forms are very clearly ballads (meter, etc.); however,

Wordsworth makes a number of moves in these poems that do not follow ballad tradition. For instance, he features a mentally challenged boy and his mother, who end up being the heroes of the story in "The Idiot Boy", and a woman who is not shamed after a sexual indiscretion and allowed to return home in "Poor Susan." Moreover, the "anti-ballad" as a form serves to remark upon the fragility of oral tradition, a way of life that is now passing.

Next, in the second chapter, I discuss poems in the *Lyrical Ballads* that have been traditionally viewed as pastorals, namely "Michael" and "The Brothers". First, I discuss "Michael" in its earliest form, as a "pastoral ballad", and demonstrate the ways in which the ballad influenced the final poem even though it ultimately took the form of blank verse. Then, I discuss "The Brothers", and demonstrate the ways in which both the ballad and pastoral influenced the poem. By presenting the poem in this way, Wordsworth avoids pastoral clichés and elevates his subject matter ("low and rustic life"), while at the same time using the "language of men". Wordsworth achieves dramatic greatness in "The Brothers", putting the reader in the same position of mourning as the protagonist, Leonard, ultimately finding himself mourning for his lost brother but also for a lost way of life.

Finally, in the third chapter I analyze a sequence of poems in the collection. This methodology attempts to do justice to the collection's order, as the poems are set in a specific order for a specific reason (as exemplified by the changes between editions). I look at the influences upon the sequence of ballads ("The Two Thieves, or the last Stage of Avarice", "A whirl-blast from behind the hill", "Song for the Wandering Jew", and

"Ruth"), and argue that they all reveal a fragility and uncertainty about the common way of life and its future, parallel to the fragility of oral tradition.

While Wordsworth de-emphasized genre and mode in the Preface to the 1800 edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*, it is still important to look at the ways in which these influenced him. The collection is titled *Lyrical **Ballads***, and a number of the poems are subtitled "pastorals". It is clear, then, that Wordsworth had genre and mode in mind during composition. Moreover, this kind of examination can give insight to the unity of the collection that Wordsworth attempts to outline in the Preface and which Coleridge argued so strongly against: "With many parts of this preface in the sense attributed to them and which the words undoubtedly seem to authorize, I never concurred" (10). Through an examination of genre and mode, I hope to reveal an even greater purpose to this collection that speaks against Coleridge's accusation of haphazardness – that is, a mourning and longing for a way of life that is no longer threatened by modernization and industrialization.

"His very words I give to you": The Anti-Ballad and a Fragility of Oral Tradition

Robert Mayo calls into question the perception of the *Lyrical Ballads* as completely new experiments in the poetic realm. "Revolutionary they unquestionably were," he writes, "but not in every respect…The *Ballads* were not such a 'complete change' as some writers would have us believe….there is a conventional side to the *Lyrical Ballads*, although it is usually overlooked" (486). Using poems published in contemporary magazines, Mayo's study of the *Lyrical Ballads* emphasizes the ways in which a large part of the collection conformed to the popular poetic modes and tastes of 1798. He notes that "except for the language and style of a few poems, supported by the theory of diction advanced in the Advertisement, and a few limited experiments with meter, the *manner* of the volume cannot be regarded as extraordinary" (506). What is interesting about Mayo's contention in this study of the *Lyrical Ballads* is the idea that the poems have more in common with already-established modes and styles, rather than being completely new inventions. While his comparison between poems published in popular magazines of the time and Wordsworth's poems emphasizes the ways in which Wordsworth's poems follow popular genres, I argue that multiple genres influence many of these poems, creating a product that is in fact a hybrid of the genres and modes that have influenced it. This hybridization, then, allows Wordsworth to achieve his aim of an authentic representation of "low and rustic" life – more specifically, he is able to authentically represent this lifestyle while at the same time revealing its fragile state.

This hybridization does not serve each genre or mode equally – rather, in certain poems certain genres are more clearly drawn upon than others, though several appear. For the purposes of this study, I focus on the ballad genre and pastoral mode as the

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principal influences upon which Wordsworth draws, and for specific reasons.

Wordsworth uses both to more authentically portray the "language of men", though the

ballad genre helps to mediate some of the pastoral tendencies toward clichés. In this

chapter I focus on two poems in which the ballad's influence clearly shows, "Poor

Susan" and "The Idiot Boy", in order to better understand the ways in which Wordsworth

simultaneously uses and modifies the conventions of the traditional ballad.

I call both of these poems "anti-ballads" for their unique qualities – both use

characteristics of the ballad genre, but the ways in which they depart from this tradition

resonate more clearly with the reader. Both poems follow generic conventions of the

ballad: "Poor Susan" describes the plight of a fallen woman, while "The Idiot Boy"

employs the dramatic narrative qualities of common folk ballads, as described earlier in

the introduction. At the same time, however, Wordsworth uses these traditional ballad

characteristics in both poems to portray very different outcomes for his subjects. As

Bakhtin notes, in a parody of a form, we must first "recognize its form, its specific style,

its manner of seeing, its manner of selecting from and evaluating the world" (51). Then,

once we recognize these characteristics, we can see the ways in which the parody, in this

case, the "anti-ballad", uses these characteristics in order to deflate them.

"Poor Susan"

In "Poor Susan", Wordsworth changes the consequences for the fallen woman

from exceedingly destitute to quite hopeful. The poem itself begins on a cheerful note,

specifically from a melodic bird: "when day-light appears,/ There's a Thrush that sings

loud, it has sung for three years" (ll. 1-2). Even though Wordsworth describes this song

as "a note of enchantment" (l. 5), however, something "ails" Poor Susan who sees "A

mountain ascending, a vision of trees;/ Bright volumes of vapour through Lothbury

glide,/ And a river [that] flows on through the vale of Cheapside" (ll. 6-8). The scene

described here is one that should automatically alert the reader that Susan is a fallen

woman, as prostitution was a given in Cheapside (Gamer and Porter 330). The fallen

woman featured as a common character in traditional folk and broadside ballads, and

often faced dire consequences for her indiscretions.[6]

But the joyful note with which Wordsworth begins this poem should alert the

reader that the consequences for Susan will not necessarily mirror those of the traditional

ballad. And, in fact, they do not. Susan remembers her old home with joy: "And a single

small cottage, a nest like a dove's,/ The only one dwelling on earth that she loves" (ll. 10-

11). Wordsworth describes this memory as one that Susan can see in front of her, but just

as easily as she perceives it, the joyful recollection fades from her sight:

> She looks, and her heart is in Heaven, but they fade,
> The mist and the river, the hill and the shade;
> The stream will not flow, and the hill will not rise,
> And the colours have pass'd away from her eyes. (ll. 12-15)

In the 1815 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth renamed this poem "The Reverie of

Poor Susan", making this image easier for readers to understand. Peter Manning notes:

"Vision and memory are one because in the post-Lockean world it is the capacity to

reflect upon one's experiences that constitutes the self. Since it is the continuity of

consciousness, and not merely of lived experience, that grounds the self, imagination

must become narrative" (353). We can thus think of Susan's thoughts of her home as

more of a dream-vision than something she can actually see in front of her – a wish that

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[6] For instance, "The Lady's Fall" and "Waly Waly, Love Be Bonny" included in Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*.

she might fulfill if she could. At the same time, however, this dream-vision gives Susan a history that had been absent from the poem in its first lines – she now has a home to which she wishes to return, and is not simply a vacant character of the London streets.

The passage just described also serves as an important contrast from the earlier description of Susan's current location in London. Manning suggests that Wordsworth did not mean to reference Cheapside as a known location for prostitutes but as a market-street, and that "for the poem's first London readers in 1800 these names would have suggested an entire world of mercantile activity, and they would have recognized the contrast…between 'the silence of the morning' and the bustle and noise which characterized the area during the day" (354). Thus, the poem not only establishes Susan's past but also gestures to the economic changes occurring in London at the time. It is likely readers would have thought of both connotations – the place of prostitution and the market place. After all, the two are not wholly unconnected. Also notable here, though, is the contrast that the two settings of the poem creates – that between the hopeful landscape of Susan's past and the dark future she will have if she stays in the current London landscape. Thus, this contrast is better understood in the context of Susan's fallen state, from which her narrative past offers her a possible escape.

The anapestic meter (quatrains in tetrameter lines, rhyme scheme AABB) of the poem is also important to note, as it distinguishes it from almost all of the other poems in the *Lyrical Ballads*. There is reason to believe that Wordsworth chose this anapestic meter for the poem because of its urban subject matter, as the other "urban" poems in the collection, "Lines Written Near Richmond Upon the Thames" and "The Two Thieves" are also written in anapests. These decadent lines speak to the soiled urban landscape

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that Wordsworth illustrates in all of these poems – a landscape that is largely divorced from the purer pastoral landscape about which Susan dreams and Wordsworth writes in poems such as "The Brothers" and "Michael". Manning interprets the anapests of the poem "as a sign of Wordsworth's desire to distance himself from…[the] spokesman", or speaker, of the poem (366). Perhaps this can even further our understanding of the anapestic meter – Wordsworth attempts to distance himself from the speaker of the poem because of the sullied nature of the urban landscape that marks Susan's descent into shame. More importantly, though, the anapestic meter removes the poem from the countryside as he usually depicts it (in iambics), a sign in its own right of a departure from a "rustic" way of life.

Even though Susan's vision fades, the hopeful note with which the poem began returns triumphant in the last stanza, in which the speaker sympathizes with Susan and urges her to return to her home:

> Poor Outcast! return – to receive thee once more
> The house of thy Father will open its door,
> And thou once again, in thy plain russet gown,
> May'st hear the thrush sing from a tree of its own. (ll. 17-20)

While Wordsworth depicts Susan in the poem as a fallen woman, her fate is not sealed – the speaker urges her to return home, to the house of her Father, who will greet her with open arms and take her in again. This is a drastic departure from the normal consequences for fallen women in traditional ballads – they are often punished with death or eternal exclusion from society. However, in this case, the speaker sympathizes with the fallen woman and places a value on her in a way that the traditional ballads rarely do. Rather than punish the fallen woman, the final stanza of Wordsworth's poem encourages forgiveness and re-admittance into Susan's childhood existence, a purer way of life. The

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lead-up mirrors that of the ballad tradition, but Wordsworth changes the consequences and thus reverses our expectations for the conclusion of the ballad. Perhaps, also, we can see the way in which Wordsworth elevates this "low" subject, giving Susan more worth and value than would have normally been attributed to her, urging readers to have even more sympathy for her.

It is not as if the "fallen woman" was more accepted in the nineteenth century than when the traditional ballads describing these women came into being and were circulated. In fact, Charles Lamb took serious issue with the last stanza of this poem, writing to Wordsworth in 1815:

> The last verse of Susan was to be got rid of at all events. It threw a kind of dubiety upon Susan's moral conduct. Susan is a servant maid. I see her trundling her mop and contemplating the whirling phenomenon thro' blurred optics; but to term her a poor outcast seems as much as to say that poor Susan was no better than she should be, which I trust was not what you meant to express. (Simpson 592)

Lamb is quite uncomfortable here with the idea that Susan might be a prostitute and so instead describes her as a servant. This leads to Lamb's issue with the idea that Susan could go home to receive forgiveness – if she was working as a servant, there would be nothing for which she would be needing forgiveness. It is possible, though, that changing our understanding of Susan from prostitute to servant does not necessarily change our understanding of the poem. Simpson describes the connection between servants and fallen women in the eighteenth century – as servants were often forbidden to marry, those who became pregnant were usually perceived as "fallen women". Because of this connection, and the connections between servant girls and "fallen women" that Lamb and the poem seem to make, Simpson argues that "Poor Susan" is quite a sophisticated poem in which Wordsworth portrays the condition of both servants and prostitutes in the

eighteenth century (603). In fact, Wordsworth did remove the last stanza of this poem when he renamed it in 1815, seemingly following Lamb's advice. The removal, however, is not my concern in this section. Rather, I would like to draw attention to the connection to real-life events that Simpson draws, as it is another trademark of this poem and helps to authenticate its depiction of "low and rustic life." The poem demonstrates even stronger connections to the ballad tradition by describing a type of real-life event with which readers would be familiar. But at the same time, Wordsworth rejects this very tradition by changing the consequences for Susan.

Lastly, the poem has even clearer connections to the ballad tradition than simply subject matter and outward form. In the commentary on the poem, Brett and Jones write that the new title of the poem, "The Reverie of Poor Susan", is a translation of the title of Burger's 1773 ballad imitation "Des Armen Suschens Traum". Susan, the protagonist, who describes a nightmare from which she has just woken up, but is dismayed to discover that the dream is actually her reality, narrates the ballad. She dies at the end of the poem, a common attribute of this kind of ballad, resembling Burger's famous "Lenore" and the fallen women poems mentioned earlier. Manning notes that the connection with Wordsworth's poem is marginal at most; however, when we consider the fact that Wordsworth later removed the last stanza of the poem, to which Lamb especially objected, at the same time that he changed the title, we can more easily see how both of these elements help to establish the theme of sexual misconduct. Thus, the removal of the last stanza, which most clearly suggests Susan's fallen past, is replaced by a title that alludes to Burger's ballad, which also could allude to a past of sexual misconduct, though

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perhaps not as clearly as the last stanza had. Either way, these ties to the ballad tradition

help us to further understand the genre's influences.

James Averill, on the other hand, argues that Burger's ballad is "not without

charm, but it hardly demands to be taken seriously. Whatever pity we might feel for the

girl is absorbed by our pleasure in the supernatural fantasy. The story of the dream

coming true, which we recognize as a mere fiction, distracts us from her sorrow" (212).

It is notable that Wordsworth removes these supernatural elements from his poem,

depicting Susan's dream as an everyday occurrence rather than a supernatural event.

Removing these supernatural elements, then, proves essential to Wordsworth's purpose in

this ballad. By doing so, we can more clearly perceive the realities of "low and rustic

life". In a way, Wordsworth removes these elements to depict this kind of life

authentically, and to mourn the way in which the urban landscape threatens it. This is

another element of Wordsworth's anti-ballad – the stripping of supernatural elements

actually serves to reveal greater truths about the status of life. This move becomes even

clearer in one of Wordsworth's most famous poems, "The Idiot Boy".

"The Idiot Boy"

At Alfdoxden in 1798, Wordsworth writes that the last stanza of "The Idiot Boy"

was the foundation of the entire poem:

> The words were reported to me by my dear friend, Thomas Poole; but I have since
> heard the same repeated of other Idiots. Let me add that this long poem was
> composed in the groves of Alfoxden almost extempore; not a word, I believe,
> being corrected, though one stanza was omitted. I mention this in gratitude to
> those happy moments, for, in truth, I never wrote anything with so much glee.
> (Butler and Green 354)

Like so many of the other poems in the *Lyrical Ballads*, "The Idiot Boy" found its basis

in real-life events – stories about real people that Wordsworth had heard during his

travels. Aside from this information, we also know that Wordsworth knew of "idiots" from William Coke's French translation of *Sketches of the Natural, Civil, and Political State of Swisserland* (354). Samuel Taylor Coleridge also references an "ideot" in a notebook entry of 1796 or 1797 (354) and Robert Southey published a similar poem about an idiot contemporaneously.[7] On the other hand, the composition of the poem "extempore" is the very opposite of oral tradition – though the ballads were performed out loud, authorship was gradually collective.

There are also a number of proposed sources from the ballad tradition for "The Idiot Boy" aside from these accounts of idiots. Burger's "Lenora", William Cowper's "John Gilpin", and Robert Burns "Tom O'Shanter" are all possible influences on the poem. Furthermore, it is likely that "The Idiot Boy" was influenced by a popular Somerset folk tale about Jacob Stone, a village tailor who gets lost in the woods and answers the calls of the owls (354). Thus, are clear echoes of the poem throughout the ballad tradition. Moreover, it was one of Wordsworth's favorites in the collection.[8]

The poem, like "The Brothers", "Michael", and "Ruth", is distinguished by its own title page, but is also unique in this study as the only one included in the 1798 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*. It is no surprise that Wordsworth incorporated it again in 1800, as this poem was one of his favorites. At the same time, the poem quite clearly fits into the collection because of its "anti-ballad" characteristics, though in different ways

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[7] There is some controversy as to who wrote his "idiot" poem first – Southey's poem first appeared in *The Morning Post* on June 30, 1798, and *Lyrical Ballads* was published two months later (Gonsalves 127). It is possible that one influenced the other, though we may never know who influenced whom.
[8] It is entirely possible, of course, that Wordsworth defended the poem because it frequently faced scrutiny. John Wilson wrote to Wordsworth in 1802, "I have seen a most excellent painting of an Idiot – but it excited in me inexpressible disgust. I was struck with the excellence of the picture – I admired the talents of the artist – but I had no other source of pleasure. The poem of the idiot boy produced upon me an effect in every respect similar" (Dundas 114).

than "Poor Susan", and, later, "Ruth". The poem is in five-line stanzas (except the first and last stanzas), rhyme scheme ABCCB, with most of the lines in iambic tetrameter (though the meter varies quite a bit throughout the poem). Repetition also characterizes the poem – words, phrases, and entire lines are carefully repeated throughout in order to create emphasis and a dramatic tone. As described earlier, the "anti-ballad" properties are actually nearly the same as those of the ballad, except that the anti-ballad uses its characteristics just to knock them down.

The label of "anti-ballad" in the case of "The Idiot Boy" functions a bit differently than in "Poor Susan". While "Poor Susan" refuses to allow its female protagonist be punished for her sexual transgression, "The Idiot Boy" refuses to allow supernatural causes to be used as explanations, and its happy ending is unusual for this type of ballad.[9] While "Poor Susan" does not contain supernatural elements, Wordsworth employs them in this case to demonstrate their thinness. The poem works so well because Wordsworth calls upon these traditional dramatic and supernatural tropes to tell the story of the idiot boy, yet they prove to be ephemeral, and do not have an actual effect on the outcome of the tale. In this section, I also show that we can see the idiot boy in terms of oral tradition. We can understand the characters as stand-ins for the ballad tradition and the pressures it feels against the written word and as a commentary on the written word's fragility. "The Idiot Boy" is quite aware of itself as a ballad, and its characters serve as both reciters and listeners.

In the first stanza of the poem, the speaker describes the setting of the poem: a "clear March night" with an owl who sings "his lonely shout,/ Halloo! halloo! a long

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[9] See Burger's "Lenora", whose supernatural elements result in a very gory ending.

halloo!" (ll. 5-6). The entire stanza recalls the opening of Coleridge's "Christabel", the

composition of which Coleridge had started but did not complete in time for its planned

addition to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*.[10] After this, the speaker introduces us

to the main problem of the poem, shifting his tone and speaking to Betty, who is in the

middle of sending her son, Johnny, off to his journey:

> –Why bustle thus about your door,
> What means this bustle, Betty Foy?
> Why are you in this mighty fret?
> And why on horseback have you set
> Him whom you love, your idiot boy? (ll. 7-11)

The narrator speaks directly to Betty multiple times throughout the poem – in fact, two

stanzas later, he begs Betty not to send Johnny on this journey, foreshadowing that it will

not go as planned: "Good Betty! put him down again" (l. 18). His pleading is to no avail,

however – Johnny must go. The speaker describes the dramatic situation that has called

for these drastic measures: "Old Susan, she who dwells alone,/ Is sick, and makes a

piteous moan,/ As if her very life would fail" (ll. 29-31). This dramatic situation is

amplified by the next four stanzas, all of which start with "and" and describe the reasons

why only Johnny can go fetch the doctor. The repetition reminds readers of the ballad

tradition, in which the plots of ballads describe similar dramatic situations with repetition.

Even in these early stanzas, however, Wordsworth plays with these tropes.

Johnny, the idiot boy, does not resemble the ballad hero we expect:

> There is no need of boot or spur,
> There is no need of whip or wand,

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[10] Opening lines of Coleridge's "Christbel":
> 'Tis the middle of night by the castle clock,
> And the owls have awakened the crowing cock;
> Tu – whit! – Tu – whoo!
> And hark, again! the crowing cock,
> How drowsily it crew. (Wordsworth and Coleridge ll. 1-5)

> For Johnny has his holly-bough,
> And with a hurly-burly now
> He shakes the green bough in his hand. (ll. 57-61)

In this stanza, the speaker dashes the reader's expectations for the hero. At first, it seems as though Johnny is so talented that he does not need the traditional tools of a horseman: "no need of boot or spur…or whip or wand". There is hope – Johnny has another tool – but the reader is disappointed to find out that it is just a "holly-bough". It becomes clear that Johnny does not know what to do on the horse in the final line of the stanza – he merely "shakes the green bough in his hand". While on the one hand this description solidifies our understanding of Johnny as mentally deficient, Wordsworth also challenges our expectations of the hero, robbing him of the tools he would need to successfully complete his journey and forcing us to question his capabilities.

The poor utility of the green bough is solidified a few stanzas later, in which the reader learns

> 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. (ll. 87-91)

If the reader had any hope for Johnny's holly bough earlier, it is completely gone by this point, when we learn that it is "motionless and dead". Moreover, in the next stanza, we learn that Johnny "quite forgot his holly whip/ And all his skill in horsemanship" (ll. 94-5). Johnny negates every expectation that we have of the hero, and it seems as though his situation is quite hopeless. At the same time, the excitement he experiences as he sets out on his journey gives him a hint of admirability. Wordsworth writes that "For joy he cannot hold the bridle,/ For joy his head and heels are idle,/ He's idle all for very joy" (ll.

84-6). In a way, Wordsworth is setting up Johnny to be the hero of the poem – he is just

not the hero that we expect.

What is even more important about this stanza is that "the moon that shines above

his head/Is not more still and mute than he". This is one of the earliest descriptions of

Johnny's speech given in the poem. While the speaker presents the discourse of Betty

Foy, Susan, and the doctor throughout the poem (the first instance at line 68), we do not

hear Johnny actually speak until the very last stanza (its foundation, according to

Wordsworth). This is due, in part, to Johnny's inability to speak as a result of his mental

condition. The speaker tells us that Johnny's "words were not a few,/ Which Betty well

could understand" (ll. 75-6), placing the readers in the opposite position of Betty, who is

the only one who can understand what Johnny says. To the readers, Johnny's speech is

often described in "burrs":

> Burr, burr – now Johnny's lips they burr,
> As loud as any mill, or near it,
> Meek as a lamb the pony moves,
> And Johnny makes the noise he loves,
> And Betty listens, glad to hear it. (ll. 107-111)

Betty here is positioned as the listener – that is, she is in the same position as the

audience to a ballad. She understands what we as readers cannot. If Betty is the listener

in this case, that puts Johnny in the position of ballad reciter. This is problematic,

however, because of Johnny's inability to speak in terms that we can understand. As

mentioned earlier, Betty is the only one who understands what Johnny says, and we as

readers do not hear his actual words until the very end of the poem. The problem of

communication extends farther than just between Betty and Johnny here – it is a problem

of communicating the oral ballad to the audience. The ballad reciter is unable to

articulate his story, and thus the audience is unable to hear it, referring to the fragility of

oral tradition that we see throughout the poem.

We see this again in the next stanza, when the speaker continues to describe

Johnny as he and Betty part ways, he to fetch the doctor and she to tend to Susan Gale:

> Away she hies to Susan Gale:
> And Johnny's in a merry tune,
> The owlets hoot, the owlets curr,
> And Johnny's lips they burr, burr, burr,
> And on he goes beneath the moon. (ll. 112-116)

Here, we see the moon again, an image that pervades the entire poem. In the previous

instance, the speaker identified Johnny's stillness with the moon, but in this stanza his

"tune", reminding us of the melodic history of the ballad, is identified with the owl's

speech of "hoots" and "currs". In this case, the description of Johnny's "tune" once again

helps us to draw parallels between the ballad tradition and Johnny's place in the poem –

sound exists, but it is unintelligible.

The speaker demonstrates a self-awareness of the poem as a tale in multiple

places, helping us to understand the poem's status as "anti-ballad". For instance, after the

narrator leaves Johnny as he heads off into the wood, he turns back to Betty Foy as she

arrives at Susan Gale's side: "And Betty, now at Susan's side/ Is in the middle of her

story,/ What comfort Johnny soon will bring" (ll. 132-4). Here, we have a story within a

story – Betty tells Susan how Johnny will bring the doctor to her to make her well. As

the other instances show, this awareness points to the multiple narratives being woven

throughout the tale – Betty's story, Johnny's story, the speaker's narrative, and even

Susan Gale's story. Allusions to reading are also present throughout the poem – for

instance, in the next stanza, the speaker tells the reader that Betty is a "poor good woman" and "you plainly in her face may read it" (ll. 142-3).

Betty Foy's narrative in the poem is of special interest because of the changes in her character and actions as the night wears on and Johnny is nowhere to be found. While she begins by telling Susan cheerfully of all the comfort Johnny will bring, her mental condition soon deteriorates. She goes so far as to nearly curse Johnny (l. 169), but quite quickly takes this out-of-character name-calling back. This serves as the beginning of Betty's brief encounter with hysteria, a kind of madness that we will also see later in "Ruth". When she decides to go out into the woods and begin to search for Johnny, Wordsworth writes:

> So, through the moonlight lane she goes,
> And far into the moonlight dale;
> And how she ran, and how she walked,
> And all that to herself she talked,
> Would surely be a tedious tale. (ll. 212-216)

The repetition of "and" in this stanza builds up the dramatic situation ensuing – in this case it amplifies the hysteria that Betty faces as she searches for her "idiot boy". A self-awareness of the "tale" that the narrator tells is also revealed at the end of this stanza – he tells his readers that he will not detail the entire time that Betty spent like this in the woods, as it would be a "tedious tale", perhaps one that would not help to build this dramatic situation.

Repetition characterizes the entire poem, and it continues in the very next stanza, referencing the ballad tradition:

> In high and low, above, below,
> In great 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. (ll. 217-221)

While the repetition of "in" amplifies the hysteria Betty feels as she starts seeing Johnny

everywhere, though he is nowhere to be found, what is of most interest in this stanza is

the remarkable similarity the final line bears to Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancyent

Marinere": "Water, water, every where./ Ne any drop to drink" (ll. 117-18). The

repetition of the two nouns before "everywhere" amplifies the severity of the issue in

both poems – the speakers can see what they desire, but it is not the actual object that

they want. Moreover, by referencing the "Rime of the Ancyent Marinere", Wordsworth

also references the ballad tradition by referring to a poem in the collection that clearly

bears resemblances to the ballad form.

Betty's hysteria inches closer and closer to madness as the poem continues to

follow her in the search for her son. The speaker describes her as being in a "sad

distemper" (l. 247) and continuing to speak of "unworthy things" (l. 250), even cursing

the pony. This goes so far that when she encounters the doctor, all she does is ask for her

son, forgetting to send him to go tend to Susan Gale (ll. 282-86). Her hysterics are so

great that she can no longer hear properly:

> She listens, but she cannot hear
> The foot of horse, the voice of man;
> The streams with softest sound are flowing,
> The grass you almost hear it growing,
> You hear it now if e'er you can. (ll. 292-96)

Even though she tries to listen, Susan cannot hear anything. While this is due to the fact

that neither Johnny nor his pony are there, the line implies more, especially when we

consider it in terms of the ballad tradition and the way the characters in this tale have

been positioned as reciters and listeners. There are other sounds to hear, though – the

sounds of nature – and the speaker urges his readers to hear these now "if e'er you can".

This formulation implies that the speaker, too, may have trouble hearing, again reminding

us of the fragility of oral tradition.

The sounds of the poem amplify – in the next line, the owls lengthen out Betty's

sobs: "They lengthen out the tremulous sob,/ That echoes far from hill to hill" (ll. 300-1).

Betty's cries here are described parallel to nature, an identification that will be more

closely examined in Chapter Three. Soon, though, Betty Foy comes to her senses when

she realizes that the pony, perhaps having some sense after all, led Johnny over to the

wood (ll. 312-16). She has new vigor, and "springs" up to go find her son. The tale of

Betty is now over, and the speaker steps out of the narrative to address the reader

directly:

> Oh reader! now that I might tell
> What Johnny and his horse are doing!
> What they've been doing all this time,
> Oh could I put it into rhyme,
> A most delightful tale pursuing! (ll. 322-26)

Reminding us that we have not heard anything about Johnny for a while, the narrator

decides to switch back over to that tale, one of a few that he juggles throughout the entire

narrative. This stepping out yet again shows an awareness on the speaker's part of the

way in which he is telling this story. Moreover, he exclaims "Oh could I put it into

rhyme". This alerts the reader that he will begin describing Johnny's side of the tale,

though there is a sense of perhaps not being able to do so with the word "could". Perhaps

the speaker is having some trouble putting this tale into the metrical constraints of the

ballad he has been reciting. Or, this could simply be due to the fact that the speaker does

not know what Johnny has been up to, as what follows is a set of hypotheticals about

what Johnny could have been doing during the narration of Betty's tale.

After these hypotheticals, the speaker again steps out of the poem with a keen

awareness of the ballad tradition in what is probably the most interesting parallel we can

find to the fragility of oral tradition, to the reciters of tales and listeners:

> I to the muses have been bound,
> These fourteen years, by strong indentures;
> Oh gentle muses! let me tell
> But half of what to him befel,
> For sure he met with strange adventures.
>
> Oh gentle muses! is this kind?
> Why will ye thus my suit repel?
> Why of your further aid bereave me?
> And can you thus unfriended leave me?
> Ye muses! whom I love so well. (ll. 347- 56)

First, the speaker tells us that he has been in the service of the muses for fourteen years,

and asks them to let him tell "but half" of what happened to Johnny during the time that

we have spent away from him, a small request. The muses ignore the speaker, however,

"repelling" his case. The appeal to the muses seems a bit out of place in the poem, as this

is typical in the literary tradition, not in the ballad. However, in this case, the speaker, in

the context of the Preface, appeals to an "everyman" muse, one who will assist him in

reciting his ballad in the "language of men". The conflation of the two traditions here is

problematic, though, and the speaker continues to bemoan his abandonment ("Why of

your further aid bereave me?/ And can you thus unfriended leave me?"). At this point, it

seems as though the oral tradition of the ballad has been cut off for good. There are hints

of this throughout the poem, yet here we see just how fragile the connection is. Written

composition is still possible, though, as Cottingham notes: "It must be remembered…that

the 'loss of language' does not mean the loss of poetic ability" (33). While this ability it

threatened by the loss of orality, it has not been completely extinguished as the written

tradition remains, though it represents a new way of being, a break from the past.

The silencing of the oral tradition, its precarious state and seeming end in this

poem, parallels the stripping of it the ballad's supernatural elements. When Betty finally

finds Johnny again, the speaker tells us that "It is no goblin, 'tis no ghost" (l. 379), and

actions described in the language of terror, are really acts of joy. For instance, the

speaker tells us "She [Betty] looks again – her arms are up –/ She screams – she cannot

move for joy" (l. 382-3). While these actions would usually be perceived as ones in

response to fear, they are revealed to actually be caused by Betty's happiness in finding

her son. Furthermore, the silencing continues in the description of the birds at the scene:

"The little birds began to stir,/ Though yet their tongues were still" (ll. 415-6). As the

supernatural elements are stripped, the silence becomes greater.

Yet all is not lost by the end of the poem – the supernatural is not quite gone, and

there may still be hope for oral tradition. We are told that Susan Gale is cured in the final

stanzas of the poem: "…Susan rise [rose] up from her bed,/ As if by magic cured" (ll.

435-6). The speaker's description of Susan's change in health with the words "as if"

introduces a hypothetical comparison, but it is not clear whether the abandonment of the

supernatural is reinforced or questioned in this line. It seems as though there could be no

other explanation for this behavior, and it is possible that the very fact that it was brought

up calls into question whether or not there is something supernatural at play here.

This is further solidified when we consider the parallel between the abandonment of the supernatural and the ending of oral tradition, as not all is silent – the owls are still singing:

> The owls have hardly sung their last,
> While our four travellers homeward wend;
> The owls have hooted all night long,
> And with the owls began my song,
> And with the owls must end. (ll. 442-46)

The fact that the owls are not quite silent gives us hope for oral tradition – perhaps someone can still sing the songs, and someone will be there to listen. There is also a self-awareness in the poem yet again – the speaker refers to the tale as "my song". Furthermore, this allows us to finally hear the final tale of the three – we already know what happened to Betty and Susan, but we do not know what Johnny has been doing this entire time. The speaker tells us "Now Johnny all night long had heard/ The owls in tuneful concert strive" (ll. 452-3), and Betty urges Johnny to explain what happened to him. In the only speech that we hear from him in the entire poem, hope for the ballad tradition is renewed:

> And thus to Betty's question, he
> Made answer, like a traveller bold,
> (His very words I give to you,)
> "The cocks did crow to-whoo, to-whoo,
> And the sun did shine so cold."
> –Thus answered Johnny in his glory,
> And that was all his travel's story. (ll. 456-62)

It is surprising that the entirety of Johnny's story is explained in two lines, and in his own words, when the other narratives took longer to tell, and covered the same span of time. While on the one hand this reinforces Johnny's simple mind, it also leaves us hopeful about the fragility that we encountered throughout the poem. His story is a strange

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version of events – we are left with his version of the story versus "the story", which it has been the narrator's duty to tell us. But, we are also finally able to understand Johnny, and listen to *his* story – even though it is not the primary narrative of the poem, perhaps it is the one which should be primary to us.

"The Idiot Boy" forces readers to rethink every expectation they have at the beginning of the ballad. Instead of a courageous knight, we are given two unlikely heroes – Betty, who finally finds her son, and Johnny, who gives us the simplest version of the tale possible. Instead of supernatural occurrences, Wordsworth makes "the incidents of common life interesting by tracing in them…the primary laws of our nature" (Gamer and Porter 176). Andrew Bennet calls this "a kind of mockery of narrative requirements" (29) – but, if we look closely at the ballad tradition, we can call it an "anti-ballad". Johnny's very simplicity becomes admirable, and in him and Betty we see joy and maternal love. Most importantly, though, the ballad makes clear the fragile state of oral tradition, and while it seems to triumph at the end of the poem, this triumph is tenuous at best. "Poor Susan" and "The Idiot Boy" depict a way of life and an oral tradition that had begun to pass, and in "The Idiot Boy" we see that we are getting further and further away from it. Yet, Wordsworth's ballads do not demonstrate his ultimate poetic achievements in the volume; as Hartman remarks: "Wordsworth's fault in some of the ballads is that of overloading a rhetorical device: he has not found his best medium" (151). His best medium, we will see, involves ballad characteristics, but not an imitation of the form.

"The pastoral ballad is sung far & near": Limitations of Genre and Mode

The pastoral mode, in theory, should have been the most appropriate mode for Wordsworth to depict "low and rustic life", as the shepherds and herdsmen depicted in pastoral were themselves "low and rustic". The mode often caused poems to become too stylized, though, and so could not facilitate an authentic representation of these characters. Wordsworth runs into similar issues in his attempt to compose a "pastoral ballad" – the adherence to the form robs the poem of its ability to fulfill his aims as stated in the Preface. Wordsworth writes: "I have at all times endeavoured to look steadily at my subject, consequently I hope it will be found that there is in these Poems little falsehood of description, and that my ideas are expressed in language fitted to their respective importance" (Gamer and Porter 178). As we will see in this chapter, it is only when Wordsworth selectively alters the genre and modal conventions upon which he draws that he successfully depicts "low and rustic life" and anxieties about its current and future ways of life.

"The Ballad Michael"

While it comes as no surprise that Wordsworth was aware of the ballad tradition in the poems he composes in near-ballad form, there is also evidence that ballads influenced Wordsworth while he was writing his pastorals. In October of 1800 Wordsworth and Coleridge firmly decided not to include "Christabel" in the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, and decided to replace it with Wordsworth's "Michael." The only problem was that Wordsworth had not yet composed "Michael", and with the printing of the collection waiting on this poem, he had to begin quickly. While he had already crafted an early manuscript blank verse version of the poem, it was nowhere near

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ready to be sent off to the press in its current form (Butler and Green 400-1). Notably, Wordsworth did not begin revision or even continue in blank-verse when he first turned back to this story. Rather, he decided to approach "Michael" as a ballad.

Wordsworth also drew inspiration from real stories that he had heard for the content of "Michael" (which will also be important to our understanding of "The Brothers"). In a letter written in 1836, Wordsworth revealed that "'Michael' was founded on the son of an old couple having become dissolute and run away from his parents; and on an old shepherd having been seven years in building up a sheepfold in a solitary valley" (*Memoirs* II 305). Wordsworth strived for this method of authentication in so much of his poetry, and the majority of the poems in this analysis were inspired by such real-life events.

Dings calls the "Michael Ballad" "a false start", noting that "a good deal of it, in fact, is doggerel" (101). Nevertheless, he contends, as I do in this chapter, that an analysis of these few, eventually struck, stanzas reveals some of the concerns Wordsworth tried to address in the final version of the poem in blank verse, as well as helps us to understand Wordsworth's ideas about narration and the pastoral mode: "Wordsworth was moving *toward* the blank-verse poem when he wrote the ballad and…the ballad – because it is so exuberantly done and is therefore less under control than the sequel – may be used as an unsubtle guide to the more subtle art of 'Michael'" (106). For Dings, the ballad makes less nuanced moves to show both the social and political issues at play in Michael's story as well as the themes of object orientation and homecoming, upon which commentators have spilled much ink in their discussions of the poem. In this section, I will examine the lines of the ballad and the ways they reveal the

inability of the form to authentically and successfully fulfill the intended purpose of the collection. Wordsworth's understanding of the ballad tradition informed his pastoral leanings in the *Lyrical Ballads* and helps him to transform both the ballad and the pastoral.

Wordsworth experiments with three different versions for the opening frame of the ballad: one in which two shepherds relate the tale, another in which Michael tells the speaker of the poem the story, and a third situation in which the speaker demonstrates his awareness of pastoral clichés. In each case, the ballad begins with a third-person speaker, much like the finalized version of "Michael" in the *Lyrical Ballads*. This speaker says that two local shepherds related Michael's story to him:

> Two shepeherds we have the two the wits [dale] of the
> Renown'd for song satire epistle & tale
> Rhymes pleasant to sing or to say
> To this sheep [h]old they went & a doggerel strain
> They carved on a stone in the wall to explain
> The cause of old Michaels decay (Butler and Green ll. 7-12, 599)[11]

This incarnation of the poem sets up an exemplary case of ballad circulation in its correlation with the way in which ballads were traditionally sung and shared. The song of the two shepherds, relating a local tale, reminds the reader of the traditional ballad that was most often sung, and that oftentimes related a local tale that was recognized by the community. Even so, Wordsworth makes an interesting move in this version of the poem by writing that the two shepherds carved the tale "on a stone in the wall to explain/The cause of old Michaels decay" (ll. 11-12). While it is not clear from the manuscript, we can assume that the stone on which the shepherds have carved this story serves as one of the stones of the sheepfold, the central object of the 1800 version of "Michael." Dings

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[11] The lines from "The Ballad Michael" are transcriptions from manuscript.

notes the centrality of this object to the ballad: "More interesting…is the use made of the sheep-fold, which is the site of the shepherds' inscription, of the leave-taking scene between Michael and Luke, and of a conversation between Michael and the poet which might have become the dramatic core of the poem" (106). The importance attributed to place in this version of the poem carries over into the 1800 version, which both begins and ends with the sheep-fold. Moreover, this object is recognizable to readers/listeners, especially as it does not change, while the landscape surrounding it changes greatly over the course of the poem, a depiction of the changing way of life. There is also a duality between the oral and written history in this manuscript stanza, similar to "The Idiot Boy".

In the second possibility for the frame of this poem, Michael himself relates his story to the speaker:

> Now, from this day forward to tie up your
> Or to teach you to make better use of your lungs
> An hour will I spend to relate
> What old Michael once told me while on
> One sweet summers morn: depress'd alone
> Byt the edge of his sheepfold he sate (Butler and Green 599)

In this formulation, the speaker again is not the primary storyteller, but hears the story from his protagonist, Michael. This is similar to many of the origins of Wordsworth's poems in the collection – in fact, "Michael" also comes out of two tales of local lore that Wordsworth hears. This formulation, though, also motions towards the third, in which the speaker's primary purpose is to correct the mis-manifestations of this tale:

> The pastoral ballad is sung far & near
> So thoughtless a falsehood it greives me to hear
> And therefore I now will relate
> What old Michael once told while on a loose stone
> One sweet summers morning depress'd & alone
> By tthe side of his sheepfold he sat (Butler and Green 601)

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In both of these trials of the pastoral ballad, the speaker describes how he will tell the real, authentic version of Michael's story, not the false one that "is sung far & near". In a moment of self-awareness, the speaker describes this pastoral ballad as one that is spreading a false version of Michael's story – we can thus assume that this speaker's version will correct those missteps. The speaker almost scolds the shepherds in his second formulation, telling them that he will teach them "to make better use of your lungs", which could also refer to their usage of pastoral clichés. This leads us to think that the speaker regards the shepherds as poor storytellers, not fulfilling their duties as ballad-singers. Thus, this speaker will correct those problems with his own ballad.

Finally, Wordsworth makes another motion back towards the ballad tradition and pastoral mode in the middle of this fragment:

> But all their suggestion & taunts to repeat
> And all that sly malice so bitter & Sweet
> My pen it would sadly distress;
> When I say that our maidens are larks in their glee
> And fair as the moon hangin over the sea
> The drift of these rhymes you will guess (Butler and Green ll. 13-18)

There is a question here as to what the speaker is referring to that will distress his pen, but it is most likely that he is describing the lies that the shepherds have been spreading about Michael's story, as these lines follow the initial lines of the poem. Thus, his pen cannot but write the true, authentic tale. Of course, this is a written, not oral, transmission, another clue to the end of oral tradition. Furthermore, the last line of this selection tells the reader that "the drift of these rhymes you will guess", referring to the pastoral clichés and local lore with which readers would be familiar. This reference to the audience is so important to the ballad tradition, and is one of the key aspects that Wordsworth takes from it and applies to both "Michael" and "The Brothers", as well as

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other poems in the collection. Furthermore, it demonstrates the authenticating move that Wordsworth tries to make in this poem.

Yet, Wordsworth made a conscious decision to abandon the formulation of this poem as a pastoral ballad and instead transform it into a poem in blank verse, clearly in the pastoral mode and with elegiac overtones. While we can never know exactly why Wordsworth abandoned this formulation of "Michael", we can make some conjectures. It is likely that Wordsworth hit a wall trying to put this poem into ballad form, seemingly because the subject matter and somber undertones of the narrative do not quite fit into ballad form. Also, there is the possibility that the "language of men" cannot be communicated through a strict outer form (the ballad), but must be done in blank verse. In fact, Wordsworth's most accomplished poems are in blank verse.

The sing-song nature of the ballad lightens it – but Wordsworth did not want to lighten the content of this poem. "Michael" is a heartbreaking tale of both the loss of inheritance (Luke's son, Michael, becomes destitute in the urban landscape, unable to inherit his father's land) and the loss of landholding (Luke's land is no longer passed down after his death). In many ways, "Michael" mourns a lost way of life more than any other of the poems in the collection, as many critics have noted.[12] The attempt to bring together a highly stylized mode and genre proves prevents Wordsworth's communication of the simple passions of the heart. As Peau notes about the final poem, "…'Michael' struggles and ultimately breaks with the constraints that the genre ["pastoral ballad"]

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[12] See Thomas Pfau, "Traumatic History and Lyrics Awakening"; Yu Yu-san, "From "Michael" to *The Excursion*: Wordsworth's Rewriting of Pastoral"; and Stephen Parrish, "*Michael* and the Pastoral Ballad", for example.

imposed on Wordsworth" (654). Thus, Wordsworth turns to blank-verse to attempt to

tell the story in the "language of men" again.

　　While many critics have remarked upon the genius of "Michael" and the way it

revolutionizes the pastoral mode, few have commented on "The Brothers", Wordsworth's

other pastoral in blank-verse, in comparison. While both poems were certainly

influenced by the pastoral, "The Brothers" is more clearly influenced by the ballad

tradition, especially in its dramatic elements. It is for these reasons that I have chosen to

examine "The Brothers" instead of the final version of "Michael". While both were

distinguished by their own title pages in the collection, "The Brothers" is further

distinguished by its placing of the reader *into* the dramatic context of the poem, forcing

him to confront the multiple losses its characters face.

"The Brothers"

　　Wordsworth's "The Brothers" first appeared in the second edition of *Lyrical*

Ballads with the subtitle "A Pastoral Poem."[13] Both Wordsworth's inspiration for the

poem and its biographical significance to the poet are important to consider. The poem is

based on two stories that Wordsworth and Coleridge had heard during a walking tour of

the Lake District in 1799. The first was the story of Jerome Bowman, who died after

breaking his leg, the second, the story of his son who had before broken his neck falling

off a crag. The son was supposed to have lain down and slept but sleepwalked off the

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[13] David Duff notes that the subtitle "A Pastoral Poem" to "The Brothers" has often been omitted from the title in various publications of the poem, partially explaining why it is so seldom commented upon as a pastoral:

> To readers accustomed to using standard modern editions of his poetry, Wordsworth's insistence on the inclusion of the generic subtitle may be somewhat surprising because most modern editions of Wordsworth omit the subtitle of the poem, unlike that of the other great 'Pastoral Poem' from *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), 'Michael', which is invariably retained. ("Paratextual Dilemmas" 236)

crag instead and died (Butler and Green 380).[14] The walking tour Wordsworth and

Coleridge had taken of the Lake District also supplied some subject matter, and

Wordsworth writes that "this poem was composed in a grove at the north-eastern end of

Grasmere Lake, which grove was in a great measure destroyed by turning the high road

along the side of the water. The few trees that are left were spared at my

intercession"(Butler and Green 380-1).[15] Thus, a piece of the poem's inspiration was the

changing landscape Wordsworth encountered. The other important circumstance of the

poem's composition to note is that Wordsworth began writing it shortly after his return to

and settlement in the Lake District with his sister Dorothy (Butler 5-6). All of these

details show just how much Wordsworth incorporated real rural experiences into the

poem.

Autobiographical elements also play an important role in "The Brothers." Butler

points out the "striking affinities to his own situation in what Wordsworth appended to

the original Ennerdale story" (6): the two brothers were orphaned when Leonard was

thirteen, just as Wordsworth and his siblings were orphaned when he was thirteen. Also,

twelve years had passed since the Priest had heard from Leonard (l. 303), who had been

"half a Shepherd on the stormy seas" (l. 43), much as twelve years had passed since

Wordsworth was in the Lake District, wandering "like Leonard, in foreign lands – and

temporary dwellings" (Butler 6). Finally, just as "to his paternal home he [Leonard] is

returned,/ With a determined purpose to resume/ The life which he lives there" (ll. 66-

68), Wordsworth also came back to the Lake District with the same intent (Butler 7).

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[14] Wordsworth was also interested psychology, here in somnambulism.
[15] This letter also depicts Wordsworth's engagement and critique of the enclosure movement during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

There was a personal problem for Wordsworth here, then, especially in the last detail –

Wordsworth had been absent from the region for the last twelve years, a separation long

enough to no longer recognize his childhood home.

Anxiety characterized Wordsworth's return, and he encountered a landscape

much changed after twelve years: "what has not been adequately recognized [about "The

Brothers"] is the degree to which Wordsworth felt anxious about his own Lake District

'tourist' experiences or the way he defined his poetic identity in 1799-1800 by weighing

the tourist against the native son" (Butler 1-2). While the poem reflects details of his

personal history, it is also a representation of the anxiety he felt at returning to the Lake

District after such a long absence. Butler describes Wordsworth as an "ambivalent

tourist" (2) upon his return to his home – while he was an actual native, the Lake District

of his memory was different than the one he returned to, making him this tourist. There

is clear apprehension at the beginning of the poem about being perceived as such in the

words of the Priest:

> These Tourists, Heaven preserve us! Needs must live
> A profitable life: some glance along,
> Rapid and gay, as if the earth were air,
> And they were butterflies to wheel about
> Long as their summer lasted; some, as wise,
> Upon the forehead of a jutting crag
> Sit perched with book and pencil on their knee,
> And look and scribble, and scribble on and look
> Until a man might travel twelve[16] stout miles,
> Or reap an acre of his neighbour's corn. (ll. 1-10)

The Priest's diatribe against tourists is, of course, mistakenly placed when he spots

Leonard, whom he does not recognize, in the cemetery. The ways in which this passage

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[16] The reference to "12 miles" could also be alluding to the twelve years that Leonard has been away from home.

reveals Wordsworth's own anxieties, though, are remarkable. The description here of the tourists who, "upon the forehead of a jutting crag/ Sit perched with book and pencil on their knee,/ And look and scribble" describes Wordsworth's own poetic project – in order to correctly represent "low and rustic life", Wordsworth had to sit and observe this kind of life, especially since he had been removed from it for so many years. He, then, is this observer who does not participate in the day's work, but merely looks on and takes notes, whether they be written or drawn. The Priest's derisive tone here suggests the ways in which tourists waste time by simply observing, rather than participating, and reveals Wordsworth's own anxieties about the same act.[17] This poses a problem when trying to correctly represent "low and rustic life" – can an observer accurately depict that in which he does not participate?

Leonard's initial observations to the Priest about the changes in scenery further reveal Wordsworth's anxieties in the poem:

> There was a foot-way all along the fields
> By the brook-side – 'tis gone – and that dark cleft!
> To me it does not seem to wear the face
> Which then it had. (ll. 130-133)

After a long absence, Leonard encounters a much-changed landscape from the one in his memory, yet another distancing factor between him and his childhood home. Wordsworth encounters the same difficulty of a changing landscape in his return to the Lake District: "Wordsworth's letters to Dorothy and his verse reveal his distress, as a returned Cumbrian, at some of the changes in his home country. He noted that his schoolboy village of Hawkshead had suffered 'great change amongst the People" (Butler 4). Even as natives, both Wordsworth and Leonard arrive back at their homes as tourists,

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[17] Wordsworth also acts as the observer in many of his other poems, such as "Tintern Abbey."

encountering a landscape different from the one lodged in their memories. This is a source of anxiety for both Wordsworth and Leonard, who are hardly able to recognize their childhood homes. Moreover, the changed landscape in both cases represents a way of life now lost – common way for shepherds is now no more, and no one is certain what this new future life will hold.

As mentioned earlier, the special form of narrative that occurs in the ballad genre marks one of its most important features. As opposed to the narrative style of the epic, the ballad narrates selectively – that is, rather than describing every single event pertaining to the story, it highlights certain events and leaves out most excess description (Fischer 33). This style of narrative is evident in "The Brothers" – most elaborate description is left out because the bulk of the poem is comprised of the dialogue between Leonard and the Priest. The poem begins with the Priest speaking to his wife, and then moves to a third-person mystery narrator for about one hundred lines. This mystery narrator provides necessary background information to the reader and some description of the scene – the only description, in fact, that we get in the entire poem. After an hour of observing Leonard, whom he considers a bothersome tourist, he finally gets up to "accost" the "lingering" stranger (l. 35-6). The narrator then gives the reader necessary background information concerning Leonard, who returns to his childhood home after twenty seasons on the sea. He notes the "confusion in his [Leonard's] memory" (l. 84) upon seeing the home of his childhood much changed with "strange alteration wrought on every side" (l. 94). In the last stanza, the Priest decides not to approach Leonard after all, who he thinks "'Tis one of those who needs must leave the path/ Of the world's business, to go wild alone" (l. 102-3), but Leonard, recognizing the Priest, approaches

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him. At this point, the mysterious third-person narrator stops for the dialogue between the Priest and Leonard, and does not return until the end of the poem.

This background information the narrator provides for the reader would be difficult to relate through dialogue as, though Leonard recognizes the Priest, the Priest does not recognize Leonard, and so is presented in the third person. The fact that the reader knows this information only increases the tension felt throughout the poem when Leonard is waiting to learn the fate of his brother – the reader, with all of the information that Leonard knows, impatiently awaits news of James as well. It is important to note that what the narrator provides is almost purely informative – there is little description of scenery included. This represents an important way in which Wordsworth draws on the ballad tradition. He provides his readers with the history, that is, the story behind the story, that listeners acquainted with a ballad would often already know, providing the orality his readers are missing. McLane notes that Wordsworth's poetic project used a wide range of oral sources (202), and, in fact, as mentioned earlier, Wordsworth based this poem on two stories he had heard from local villagers. If listening to this poem, the local villagers would immediately recall the story of Jerome Bowman and his son, or, if the listener was acquainted with Wordsworth, he would recall Wordsworth's own story. At the level of the plot, a villager acquainted with Leonard and the Priest would also recall, like the Priest, the story of Leonard and James. To put readers at this level, then, necessitates giving his readers the missing orality – that is, the background information necessary to understand the story. McLane notes that, "for Wordsworth, the truth of much of his poetry inhered in the truth – in the authority – of the traditions and incidents recounted therein" (202). The poem's authority, then, lies in the authenticity of the story

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of the Bowmans and of his own life; at the level of the poem, it lies in the truth of the

story of Leonard and James.

Narrative description is largely displaced by the dialogue between Leonard and

the Priest that makes up the majority of the poem. Fischer notes that "the ballad does not

narrate in a broad, epic flow, but achieves brevity by leaving out almost all the narrative,

reflective or descriptive feeling…the focus is on meaningful objects and…significant

scenes. Everything in between is left in darkness" (33). When description does appear in

"The Brothers", its purpose usually is to inform Leonard of the changes in the scenery of

his childhood home, moving the action of the poem. When he tells the Priest that he does

not remember the chasm near the brook, the Priest responds:

> There were two Springs which bubbled side by side
> As if they had been made that they might be
> Companions for each other: ten years back,
> Close to those brother fountains, the huge crag
> Was rent with lightning – one is dead and gone,
> The other, left behind, is flowing still.[18] – (ll. 139-143)

While the passage is descriptive, its primary purpose is not to describe but to inform

Leonard why his memory is failing – the reason behind the change in scenery. The line

also reveals "doubt about the affections that hold a native to his place" (Bromwich 134) –

Wordsworth's own anxieties. This pattern continues throughout the poem – the emphasis

in the dialogue is on information and plot, rather than description, as we and Leonard

come closer to discovering James' fate. At this point, both Leonard and the reader can

hold on to the thought that James may still be alive.

The tension in this narrative style comes to its height right before the revelation

that James is, in fact, dead. The Priest describes James after Leonard has gone off to sea:

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[18] Also worth noting is the foreshadowing of James' death in this passage.

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> Yet still the spirit of a mountain boy
> In him was somewhat checked, and when his Brother
> Was gone to sea and he was left alone
> The little colour that he had was soon
> Stolen from his check, he drooped, and pined and pined. (ll. 331-5)

Listening to this, Leonard can take no more, and interjects: "But these are all the graves of full grown men!" (l. 336), to which the Priest replies:

> Aye, Sir, that passed away: we took him to us.
> He was the child of all the dale…
> And many, many happy days were his.
> But whether blithe or sad, 'tis my belief
> His absent Brother still was at his heart…
>   –   You are moved!
> Forgive me, Sir: before I spoke to you,
> I judged you most unkindly. (ll. 337-8, 341-3, 347-49)

Herein lies the climax of the poem: Leonard finally knows, for sure, that James is dead (l. 341). What is worse is that the Priest attributes at least part of this death to Leonard's leaving, which only seems to add to the guilt that he feels and the subsequent outburst of emotion, of which we as readers only know because the Priest exclaims that Leonard is moved. In this way, Wordsworth uses the conventions of the ballad tradition, in which the narrative only includes main plot points rather than loads of description, and thus uses the Priest's dialogue to inform the reader that Leonard is crying. We do not *see* it, but we hear of it, through the Priest's words. Even further, the Priest's language puts us in Leonard's position. By using the second person ("You are moved!") to refer to Leonard, it is as if the Priest is in fact referring to the reader as she reads the poem. As I mentioned earlier, we know that Leonard knows the Priest, but we do not know at the beginning of the poem whether or not James is still alive – thus, we are put in the same position as Leonard – *we* become the sailor crying for the loss of his brother, and the loss of his

childhood home. *We* mourn for the loss of a way of life, for the changed landscape that we no longer recognize.

This dramatic description is exacerbated by the fact that Leonard never openly mourns for his brother. In fact, the narrator of the poem never describes Leonard's expressions of sorrow – the only way the reader can discern what he is feeling is through the dialogue of the priest. We only become aware of Leonard's weeping when the Priest exclaims,

> – If you weep, Sir,
> To hear a stranger talking about strangers,
> Heaven bless you when you are among your kindred!
> Aye. You may turn that way – it is a grave
> Which will bear looking at. (ll. 232-36)

In a parallel case, the Priest realizes that he had originally misjudged Leonard's character: "You are moved!/ Forgive me, Sir: before I spoke to you,/ I judged you most unkindly" (ll. 347-49). In fact, the Priest does not even assert that Leonard's brother, James, is dead until about three quarters of the way into the poem, creating the tension pervasive throughout it. Wordsworth removes the open act of mourning from the poem – the reader must instead create his own vision of sorrow through the descriptions of Leonard's emotional reactions when he learns of his brother's death. This keeps us from classifying the poem simply as a pastoral – it is a hybrid poem that draws upon ideas of the mode, and, as I have argued, the ballad. Christopher Miller notes that the "Romantic poetry of mourning…tended to avoid the act of official public commemoration. It was more typically concerned with the loss of friends and family members" and was typically found "in the confines of a sonnet or in a passage of a larger poem rather than a freestanding elegy" (126) – Wordsworth follows this in burying his pastoral inside of a

poem that looks nothing like it. This, of course, makes the poem difficult to classify

according to traditional genre ideas. Jacqueline Labbe draws attention to Wordsworth's

reference to "elder writers" in the "Advertisement" to the 1798 edition: "it is remarkable,

although often unremarked, how the majority of the Advertisement argues not for the

novelty of the poems to come, but for their conformity to the best habits of 'elder

writers'"[19] (22). She goes on to argue that Wordsworth wants his readers to be educated

on the states and genres of traditional poetry in order to appreciate the hybridity of the

poems in the volume of *Lyrical Ballads*. Wordsworth was obviously familiar with these

poetic traditions, considering them but not following their conventional characteristics

explicitly, pushing the case here in the "Advertisement" for his "experiments."

Finally, we can also see the Priest as a minstrel, the ballad-reciter, and ourselves,

along with Leonard, as the audience. The Priest tells the story of the brothers, and

reveals to us the piece that Leonard is missing – whether or not James survives. The

priest becomes an informant and storyteller for the reader after the narrator provides all of

the background information necessary to understand the story being told. All of these

characteristics show an awareness on Wordsworth's part of this ballad tradition, and the

ways in which he pulls from this tradition in order to achieve his poetic purpose as laid

out in the Preface. By placing the priest as story-teller in the "The Brothers," the reader

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[19] "The majority of the following poems are to be considered as experiments…Readers of superior judgment may disapprove of the style in which many of these pieces are executed; it must be expected that many lines and phrases will not exactly suit their taste. It will perhaps appear to them, that wishing to avoid the prevalent fault of the day, the author has sometimes descended too low, and that many of his expressions are too familiar, and not of sufficient dignity. It is apprehended, that the more conversant the reader is with our elder writers, and with those in modern times who have been the most successful in painting manners and passions, the fewer complaints of this kind will he have to make" (Gamer and Porter 47).

is given a more trustworthy narrator who is not only a priest, but a *pastor*, one part of the community within the poem – a depiction, then, of "low and rustic life."

In a letter to Charles James Fox in 1801, Wordsworth describes his intent in the composition of "The Brothers":

> In the two Poems, 'The Brothers' and 'Michael' I have attempted to draw a picture of the domestic affections as I know they exist amongst a class of men who are now almost confined to the North of England…Their little tracts of land serve as a kind of permanent rallying point for their domestic feelings, as a tablet upon which they are written which makes them objects of memory in a thousand instances when they would otherwise be forgotten. It is a fountain fitted to the nature of social man from which supplies of affection, as pure as his heart was intended for, are daily drawn. (460-61)

Farmers and peasants, with whom Wordsworth had direct experience, were important to him because of their "domestic affections". As a native, he understood the rural way of life and was able to accurately represent it. Returning to his homeland in the semblance of a tourist, he was also able to describe real feelings of apprehension about this homecoming in his poetry. And, by incorporating details from his personal life into the poem, Wordsworth only continued to make "The Brothers" an accurate representation of rural life in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, at the same time mourning the loss of the rural life of his childhood, and Leonard's personal loss of James. It is because of these characteristics that Wordsworth brings the pastoral as well as the ballad to new heights, transforming them into a modern representation of rural life and also an experiment, as with the representations of Leonard's emotional response to his brother's death. The autobiographical connection here, that is, the close ties Wordsworth feels to the subject of this poem, render it personal for the reader as well. By placing the reader as Leonard, the reader feels what he feels, and thus, what Wordsworth feels. This is experimentation and using the "real" language of the rural – the reader, no matter who he

is, can now understand. Wordsworth is only able to create this experiment, and render it successful, with his knowledge and use of the content and characteristics of both the pastoral and the ballad traditions – more importantly, though, this experiment only triumphs because Wordsworth successfully breaks from the constraints of both tradition with the "real language of men".

The poems "The Brothers" and "Michael" not only mourn for the loss of specific characters, but also for a lost way of life. Leonard is anxious about the changed landscape he encounters because it represents a way of life with which he is completely unfamiliar: "In 'Michael' and 'The Brothers'…what is lost or threatened is the pastoral situation itself, and since the characters are deeply rooted in that situation their whole selves are at stake" (Dings 135). Wordsworth is only able to depict this situation, though, when he breaks free of the constraints of the ballad genre and pastoral mode, deciding only to draw upon certain characteristics of each that will render the ultimate poem authentic. Bakhtin argues that "those genres that stubbornly preserve their old canonic nature begin to appear stylized. In general any strict adherence to a genre begins to feel like a stylization, a stylization taken to the point of parody, despite the artistic intent of the author" (6). This stylization is apparent in "The Ballad Michael", and helps us to understand why the early version of the poem fails to offer readers an authentic vision of "low and rustic life". At the same time, though, Wordsworth does not simply use the "language of men" to depict this situation – the use of the pastoral mode elevates these shepherd characters to a higher status: "In calling poems like *Michael* by this title [pastoral], Wordsworth evidently meant to give the type itself a higher rank in poetry, just as he had enlarged the scope and raised the status of the ballad" (38). Thus, we can begin

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to see the moves Wordsworth makes in order to urge his readers to identify with the

characters he presents. It is not only the shepherds who mourn for the loss of oral

tradition and common ways of life, but readers as well. Readers can therefore see the

similarities in the realities of their situations in Wordsworth's simple depictions.

"That oaten pipe of hers is mute": Hopelessness, Identification, Mourning

In the last two chapters I have discussed poems in terms of their genre and modal characteristics and the ways in which these attributes reveal a sense of fragility in the poems. However, this methodology ignores the actual structure of the *Lyrical Ballads*. These poems were placed in a specific order for specific reasons, and we can assume Wordsworth had a purpose in mind when doing so, especially when we consider his deliberate change in the order of the poems in the 1800 version of *Lyrical Ballads*. While we may never know the exact reasons, we can still make appropriate conjectures. These poems are not simply a random collection of Wordsworth's favorites – they are linked together under the title *Lyrical Ballads* for a specific reason. It is necessary, then, in order to conduct a full examination of *Lyrical Ballads*, to examine a set of the poems in the sequence in which Wordsworth placed them in the collection – the focus of this chapter.

Relatively few critics have examined the poems of the *Lyrical Ballads* in order. Cottingham is one who does – she argues that, in the 1798 edition, we "become aware of a developing theme, that of an increasing uncertainty as to the ability of language to deal with strong emotions", which she sees as culminating in "The Idiot Boy", the turning point in the volume. The poems that follow demonstrate a new acceptance of loss (25-6). When we look closely at the poems in this selection, though, we do not see so much a change or turning point as an overall sense of impending change and an inability to stop it, resulting in mourning for what has been lost. "Low and rustic life" no longer holds its charms, and is slowly disappearing from view. While all of these poems are in some sense ballads, it is not this characteristic alone that unites them – they all reveal a sense of

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fragility of the "low and rustic" way of life, and an inability to combat its impending

disappearance.

A number of similarities appear as we look through the sequence of four poems

that serve as the focal point of this chapter: "The Two Thieves, or the Last Stage of

Avarice," "A whirl-blast from behind the hill," "Song for the Wandering Jew," and

"Ruth." None of these poems appeared in the 1798 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, and I have

chosen both for their similarities and for the way in which each poem builds upon the one

before it. First among these similarities are genre and modal influences that have been

described in the preceding chapters. It is also of note that each of these poems have real-

life influences – that is, Wordsworth found inspiration for each of these poems in actual

occurrences and stories that he heard during his travels. The characters described in the

poems are also stand-ins for all of humankind with similar human experiences – ones that

we share in especially difficult times. These difficult times are characterized by changes

for shepherds and farmers during the Romantic period, enclosure being the most

prominent among them. Finally, these poems all continue to show markers of the

pastoral as Wordsworth repurposes it for this collection – mourning for a way of life lost,

and a looking forward to a new life ahead – hopeful, yet aware of difficulties on the

horizon.

"The Two Thieves, or the Last Stage of Avarice"

The first poem in this sequence is the sixteenth poem in Volume II of the 1800

edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, and so this sequence serves as the exact middle of the volume

(total thirty-five poems). Wordsworth describes the inspiration for this poem as "from

the life, as I was in the habit of observing when a boy at Hawkshead school" (Thompson

192). The characters in the poem find their basis in two real-life Hawkshead residents,

Daniel ("Old Daniel") and Elizabeth Mackreth ("the daughter at home") (Butler and

Green 388). The poem's frame was also influenced by Thomas Bewick (1753-1828),

who produced wood engravings of natural subjects (388). This frame can help us see this

poem as a kind of position piece, describing the overall project of the *Lyrical Ballads* in

one place.

The frame of the poem, Bewick's engravings, mirrors the larger themes of the

project, the transference of stories and ballad material from oral to written:

> Oh now that the genius of Bewick were mine
> And the skill which He learn'd on the Banks of the Tyne;
> When the Muses might deal with me just as they chose
> For I'd take my last leave both of verse and prose.
>
> What feats would I work with my magical hand!
> Book-learning and books should be banish'd the land
> And for hunger and thirst such troublesome calls
> Every ale-house should then have a feast on its walls. (l. 1-8)

While the wood engravings do not necessarily correspond to oral tradition, considering

the greater project of the collection as described in the Preface, there are ways in which

we can understand the prints Wordsworth mentions here as references to oral tradition,

especially when we look at an earlier manuscript version of these opening lines:

> Oh! Now that the box-wood and the graver were mine
> Of the Poet who lives on the banks of the Tyne!
> Who has plied his rude tools with more fortunate toil
> Than Reynolds e'er brought to his canvass and oil.
>
> Then, Books and Book-learning! I'd ring our your knell!
> The Vicar should scarce know an A from a L;
> And for hunger and thirst and such troublesome calls
> Every ale-house should then have a feast on its walls. (Gamer and Porter
> 335)

A few revisions are noteworthy when examining this manuscript version. While the speaker does not identify Bewick directly by name, he describes him as the "Poet who lives on the banks of the Tyne" (l. 2). Portraying a wood engraver as a poet seems a bit unusual (artist would probably be a more common term). A person's actions while looking at a wood engraving closely resemble the act of reading, though, and as Wordsworth distinguishes between the actions, it is important that we do so as well. The speaker in the poem longs for the tools available to the woodcutter ("Now that the box-wood and the graver were mine") and notes that Bewick's success in "poetry" is even greater than that of the celebrated artist Joshua Reynolds. We can thus compare the ode to the smaller, lesser-known artist to Wordsworth's dedication to other commoners throughout the collection.

Furthermore, the speaker tells us that if he had Bewick's tools, then he would immediately stop composing poetry – that is, in its written form: "Then, Books and Book-learning! I'd ring out your knell!/ The Vicar should scarce know an A from a L" (l. 5-6). The lines published in the 1800 version of *Lyrical Ballads* have the same meaning – that if Bewick's practice of woodcuts were available to him, the speaker would never write poetry again. There are parallels here between the woodcutter and past oral tradition – if the tools of oral tradition were available to the speaker, he would tell his tales orally instead of in written form. Because the speaker describes this as a hypothetical situation, though, we may infer that the speaker can no longer access oral tradition.

While many poems in the collection are written in blank verse, which in fact helps to authenticate Wordsworth's purpose for the collection, the poems written in ballad and

anapestic meter were carefully chosen by the poet. In this case, the meter of the poem (tetrameter lines, rhyme scheme AABB), remind us of the ballad tradition. Written in meter similar to that of traditional ballads, Wordsworth salutes this oral tradition at the same time that he laments his inability to create woodcuts. Thus, we can draw parallels between the two modes of artistry, and see this poem as a lament for the passing of oral tradition as well. Moreover, the meter is anapestic, just as in "Poor Susan", and the poem's setting is also in the village landscape, further exemplifying the way in which Wordsworth uses anapestic meter to demonstrated the sullied urban landscape in this collection.

In the last two lines of the second stanza (identical in both versions), the speaker describes how he would decorate the walls of taverns with these woodcuts. These are referred to as a "feast on the walls", reminding the reader of the common phrase "feast for the eyes". More importantly, however, this transition helps the speaker establish the remaining details of the frame of the story while another character is brought in: "The Traveller would hang his wet clothes on a chair" (l. 9). Here is the listener, or audience, for this ballad, a necessary element for traditional ballads and a common one in the ones Wordsworth includes in this collection. This reference to the audience is also one of the elements from which he draws so clearly in many of the poems in blank verse. Moreover, this is how broadside ballads, typically illustrated with woodcuts, were characteristically displayed during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries – they would decorate the walls of taverns.

In this third stanza Wordsworth again makes a comparison between the story he is about to tell and greater, more well-known stories: "Let them [the wet clothes] smoke, let

them burn, not a straw would he care,/ For the Prodigal Son, Joseph's Dream and his

Sheaves,/ Oh what would they be to my tale of two Thieves!" (ll. 10-12). As in the first

stanza, where the speaker compares Bewick's creations with Joshua Reynolds' paintings,

he makes a similar comparison here between some of the most familiar Bible stories and

his tale of two thieves. Furthermore, these Bible stories also remind us of oral tradition,

as they were first transmitted orally, before many were literate or had access to the

printed Bible. Also, many learned of these stories after viewing paintings of them on the

walls of churches, another version of the woodcuts on the walls of the tavern. Most

importantly, we should remember that the speaker is referring to the greatness and power

of this story *if* it were a woodcut on the tavern wall. But his only skill, unfortunately, is

writing poetry, and so it must be the medium through which he will tell this tale of two

thieves.

Wordsworth uses this storytelling imagery throughout the poem, including within

the main story that the traveller hears. For instance, he writes that Old Daniel's eye "tells

a plain tale of the days that are flown" (l. 24), yet another instance of an image telling a

story (the earlier being the woodcuts). The tale takes up the majority of the rest of the

poem – the speaker describes Old Daniel, a carpenter, and Little Dan, his grandson, as

they work in his shop. The two roam the streets with their "wiles", stealing in order to

survive. It is in this narrative portion of the poem that Wordsworth draws a parallel

between the subjects of his poems and his readers. He writes:

> Dan once had a heart which was mov'd by the wires
> Of manifold pleasures and many desires:
> And what if he cherish'd his purse? 'Twas no more
> Than treading a path trod by thousands before. (ll. 25-28)

In this stanza, Wordsworth describes how Dan "cherishes his purse" – that is, he cares about money. Dan probably worries about having enough of it, as it is unlikely that he suffers from greed considering the figure who influenced this poem. Wordsworth seemingly makes little of stealing to acquire money, and asks the reader not to judge Daniel for it, as it is "no more/ Than treading a path trod by thousands before" (l. 27-8). Wordsworth shows his readers the similarities between these "low" and everyday characters and his readers – they can serve as representations of the audience[20]. Thus, we can see our own lives in theirs. All of us worry about money, and often go to extremes to acquire it, as Daniel had to do.

Even so, Daniel is distinguished from the readers in one regard – he resorted to thievery in order to fill his purse:

> 'Twas a path trod by thousands, but Daniel is one
> Who went something farther than others have gone;
> And now with old Daniel you see how it fares
> You see to what end he has brought his grey hairs. (ll. 29-32)

In the first line of this stanza, Wordsworth reminds his readers that concerns about money are common issues, but the tone changes near the end of the line when he remarks "but Daniel is one/ Who went something farther than others have gone" (ll. 29-30). It is at this point that the title of "the two thieves" comes into play – the two thieves are Daniel and his grandson, who have gone "farther than others" in order to have enough money to survive. We also know this from Wordsworth's own description of the poem, in which he writes about his pity for Daniel Mackreth, a poor man whom he knew at Hawkshead.

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[20] This is a common move throughout the collection. In a letter to John Wilson, Wordsworth described this part of his aim: "This proves that the feelings there delineated [are] such as all men *may* sympathize with. This is enough for my purpose. [It] is not enough for me as a poet, to delineate merely such feelings as all men *do* sympathise [with] but it is also highly desirable to add to these others, such as all men *may* sympathize with and such as there is reason to believe they would be better and more moral beings if they did sympathize with" (Hayden 38).

In a sense, Wordsworth wants his readers not to go to such dark lengths, but at the same time he refuses to condemn the characters from having done so.

Instead of a condemnation, the speaker actually pities these two characters and in the last stanza brings us back to the frame – back to the ballad and oral tradition. In it, we are acquainted again with the speaker's voice, but he does not speak to the reader this time. Rather, he addresses the character Daniel directly:

> Old Man! whom so oft I with pity have ey'd,
> I love thee and love the sweet boy at thy side:
> Long yet may'st thou live, for a teacher we see
> That lifts up the veil of our nature in thee. (ll. 45-48)

In this direct address to Daniel, the speaker remarks that he does not look at the elderly man with judgment, but with pity, mirroring the way he wrote about those he observed in Hawkeshead. This pity allows him to feel love for Daniel and his grandfather, and this love in turn allows him to go even farther. The speaker feels sympathy for these characters, and his declaration of it urges his readers to feel that sympathy as well. Throughout the entire narration the speaker has been urging us, as readers, to see the parallels between the characters and our own lives, and in this last stanza he goes so far as to call Daniel a "teacher" that "lifts up the veil of our nature in thee [Daniel]" (ll. 7-8). The last line urges us to look into Daniel's human nature and inside our own simultaneously, in order to see how similar the two really are. This return at the end of the poem to the inner self, celebrated in the preface to the 1800 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, is one of the themes that we will continue to see throughout this sequence of poems.

"A whirl-blast from behind the hill"

The second poem in this sequence, untitled, but conventionally referred to as "A whirl-blast from behind the hill" (the first line of the poem), at first glance bears little to no resemblance to the "The Two Thieves" or the two poems that come after it in this sequence. A poem in twenty-seven lines, the first twenty-three appear in one stanza, and a quatrain follows it to complete the poem. Upon further examination, however, we can see that this poem is also a ballad. The rhyme scheme is AABB, except for the first and last stanzas, which are ABAB. We can split the large first verse paragraph into quatrains with tetrameter lines, like "The Two Thieves". This is distinguished from ballad stanza, characterized by alternating rhymes, but reminds us of it because of its ability to be split into quatrains, even though there is a lack of white space in the poem. One anomaly exists: a line about three quarters of the way into the poem that rhymes with no other and splits it. This poem also urges its readers to look within themselves, but the parallels from which they should look this time are in nature, rather than in the poem's characters.

The poem, like the others in this sequence, was also inspired by real-life events. Dorothy Wordsworth writes that the first version was written by her brother "On our return, sheltered under the hollies, during a hail-shower. The withered leaves danced with the hailstones. William wrote a description of the storm", in March 1798 (Butler and Green 388). The poem was later revised on August 1, 1800. Wordsworth writes that the nature event the story is based upon was "observed in the holly grove at Alfoxden, where these verses were written in Spring of 1799" (388). He also writes that the hills of Alfoxden were a pleasure to see again after forty-one years – another homecoming of sorts, reminding us of the biographical and homecoming similarities in "The Brothers".

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The speaker of the poem describes a hailstorm, modeled on the observations Wordsworth made of his natural surroundings as it was taking place. The first quatrain describes the entire action of the poem:

> A whirl-blast from behind the hill
> Rush'd o'er the wood with startling sound:
> Then all at once the air was still,
> And showers of hail-stones patter'd round. (ll. 1-4)

This is quite a succinct overview, and what follows is the speaker's own experience of this hailstorm. The speaker describes: "I sate within an undergrove/ Of tallest hollies…" (ll. 6-7). In the next few lines the speaker describes the landscape, and then moves into a description of the small pieces of nature that the hailstorm disrupts:

> But see! where'er the hailstones drop
> The wither'd leaves all skip and hop,
> There's not a breeze – no breath of air –
> Yet here, and there, and every where
> Along the floor, beneath the shade
> By those embowering hollies made,
> The leaves in myriads jump and spring,
> As if with pipes and music rare
> Some Robin Good-fellow were there,
> And all those leaves, that jump and spring,
> Were each a joyous, living thing. (ll. 13-23)

The poem shifts in this passage – the speaker first describes the falling hailstones, causing the "wither'd leaves" to "skip and hop" seemingly on their own, without even a hint of wind or "breath of air". Then, a few lines later, the "wither'd leaves" turn into "leaves in myriads" – a more positive description, to be sure – that "jump and spring". This line (19) is the only one without a rhyme pair in the entire poem, and marks yet another subtle shift. At this point, the speaker changes from a description of his surroundings to a hypothetical situation in which "with pipes and music rare/ Some Robin Good-fellow were there" (ll. 20-1) to make these leaves dance. The shift also

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serves as a reminder of the ballad tradition, since traditional ballads were typically sung. Thus, Wordsworth establishes a way in which we can see this ballad as also acting as a song – a song to which leaves (or pages) dance instead of listeners. The melody mirrors the hailstorm, the natural event surrounding the speaker. Finally, the darker tones at the beginning of the selection have completely disappeared by the end, when the speaker describes each leaf as a "joyous, living thing".

Wordsworth reclaims the ominous aspect of a hailstorm in this poem – whereas it can actually be a frightening experience (large, heavy stones hurtling down on you, often painful when they make contact), Wordsworth turns it into a literary figure for georgic nature. The final lines of the poem in its draft form are especially important in this context: "This long description why indite?/ Because it was a pleasant sight" (Owen and Smyser, II, 128). The pitiless pelting of the storm is no longer an element of nature that is both scary and unavoidable, but a key to expression of gratitude for nature, and the ways in which it can bring joy to those who observe it.

In the last stanza of the poem, the speaker's focus shifts yet again – both visually, with this stanza being the only one set apart from the rest of the poem, and in content:

> Oh! grant me Heaven a heart at ease
> That I may never cease to find,
> Even in appearances like these
> Enough to nourish and to stir my mind! (ll. 20-23)

As in "The Two Thieves", the speaker of this poem turns back to the self in these final lines. The chief difference between this and the previous poem is the cause of this reflection – whereas in "The Two Thieves" the sympathetic character causes him to reflect, in this case what the speaker sees in nature causes him to reflect inwardly. Wordsworth writes that "even" in these happenings, meaning those which seem slight or

normal, he might find something of sympathy, something causing personal reflection. He also wishes for a "heart at ease" – one that is not under duress, but that is calm and capable of reflection.

It is hard to decrypt the tone at the end of the poem – is it hopeful? Or longing? I contend that there is a bit of both in Wordsworth's lines, as with the other poems included in this examination. There is certainly a hopeful tone at the end of the poem – the speaker is able and hopes to be able to continue to have such wonderful reflections as a result of existing in nature. Yet, at the same time, there is a concern revealed in this last stanza that this will not happen in the future – the very fact that the speaker asks that he "may never cease to find" enough, shows his fear that this practice will end in the future. There is an uncertainty here for a way of life, the peasant life, that finds joy in nature, lost, or very near to being lost. This same note rings quietly throughout the entire collection, and comes full circle by the end of this sequence.

"Song for the Wandering Jew"

Readers would have recognized the title of the next poem, "Song for the Wandering Jew", as referring to the common "Jew ballad" that had its roots in the ballad tradition. Contemporary writers also created their own versions of this ballad, including Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Percy Shelley. In *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*, Thomas Percy writes that "The Wandering Jew", the title of the ballad of this type he includes in the collection, is of "considerable antiquity" (116). The basic story that most of these ballad imitations share is as follows: a Jew rebukes Jesus and refuses to let him rest on his way to be crucified, and as a punishment for these sins must wander the earth unceasingly until the Second Coming.

We know that Wordsworth bought a copy of Percy's *Reliques* containing this poem in Germany on October 1, 1798 (Butler and Green 389); however, this was not the only inspiration for the poem. Once again, the content of the poem and its actual composition were inspired by real-life events. Dorothy Wordsworth wrote in her journal on September 30, 1798 that she and Wordsworth saw a Jew, "meek and unresisting, abused and driven from Hamburg" (389). It is likely that both of these occurrences influenced the composition of this poem, as it was not written until 1800 in either Germany or Grasmere (389).

While the stories inspiring each ballad are the same, the ballad of the wandering Jew as it appears in Percy is markedly different from Wordsworth's version. Its narrative voice is in the third person, in ballad meter (4-3-4-3), and much longer than Wordsworth's five-stanza ballad. Moreover, Percy's ballad gives a narration of the story – it describes Christ, the affront, and then the Jew's punishment. Wordsworth takes a much different approach in his version – he only alludes to the Jew in his fated state, that of permanently wandering. There is also a focus on nature in the poem, fitting in much more clearly with the *Lyrical Ballads* collection than with the tradition of this ballad. The poem follows quite neatly from "A whirl-blast", likening the human condition to the condition of nature.

Wordsworth's "Song for the Wandering Jew" is written from a first-person perspective, another key difference from Percy's version, though the reader is not aware of this perspective until the last stanza of the poem. In the first stanza the speaker laments,

> Though the torrents from their fountains
> Roar down many a craggy steep,

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> Yet they find among the mountains
> Resting-places calm and deep. (ll. 1-4)

The following three stanzas of the poem are nearly exactly the same in formulation as this first one – in fact, two out of the three also begin with the word "though" (the third stanza begins with "if", which serves the same purpose). Also, the rhyme scheme is ABAB throughout the entire poem. In this first stanza, the Jew describes the enviable state of torrents – while they must go down a "craggy steep", they ultimately find resting places among the mountains "calm and deep". He continues in the following three stanzas to describe other elements of nature (an eagle, a Raven, and a Sea-horse); however, this is the only stanza in which he describes an object, rather than an animal. The speaker sees an image of his own struggles in nature, but envies the torrents' ability to find peace in a final resting place, something that the speaker does not have access to – at least not yet.

This sympathizing with nature comes full circle in the final stanza of the poem, in which the speaker identifies with the plight of the wandering Jew:

> Day and night my toils redouble!
> Never nearer to the goal,
> Night and day, I feel the trouble,
> Of the Wanderer in my soul. (ll.16-20)

The speaker clearly identifies with the Jew, but also with nature, in this final stanza. Like the endings of the "The Two Thieves" and "A whirl-blast", however, the reader is left unsure if the speaker is feeling hopeful, or if he is in just as dire a situation as before. On the one hand, his toils "redouble" and become greater, and in the very next line we learn that he is "never nearer to the goal". Yet throughout the poem the speaker tries to identify with nature – nature has the ability to find its solace. So, we are left wondering –

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was the hopeful note for nature all for naught? Is the speaker really destined for an eternity of misery?

Even though the ending is ambiguous, we are certainly left with a different sense of hope at the end of this version of the ballad compared to Percy's ending:

> "If you had seene his death," saith he,
> "As these mine eyes have done,
> Ten thousand thousand times would yee
> His torments think upon:
> And suffer for his sake all paine
> Of torments, and all woes."
> These are his words and eke his life
> Whereas he comes or goes. (ll. 121-28)

At the end of the poem, the wandering Jew, speaking to a Christian, describes how the Christian would feel if he were in the position of the Jew. This reveals the Jew's remorse for his actions, but also urges the Christian to identify with himself, establishing a community of believers and identification. This community is notably absent from Wordsworth's version of the poem – the speaker identifies with the wandering Jew, but there is no community of believers to aid him. Rather, the speaker, alone, is forced to identify with nature. There is no Christian community. In the context of Percy's version, then, the ending of this poem is quite dark – there seems to be no hope for the speaker, as he is destined for a life alone in nature. The ambiguity therefore leans more toward hopelessness rather than hopefulness in "Song for the Wandering Jew". This is starkly different from "Ruth", which also ends alone in nature, but attempts this Christian community – to ambiguous results as well

"Ruth"

"Ruth", the final poem in this selection, brings all of the elements of the poems mentioned so far full circle. The poem was most likely composed in Germany in 1799

(though no manuscript evidence supports this dating). Dorothy Wordsworth describes the writing out of the poem on July 27, 1800, and mentions that Wordsworth read it after supper on August 22, 1800. Wordsworth writes that it was "suggested by an account I had of a wanderer in Somersetshire" (Butler and Green 389). Like the previous three, this poem was also influenced by real-life observations.

Aside from these observations, there were a number of influences for this poem. For instance, the Honorable Mr. Justice Coleridge wrote how Wordsworth came to enjoy the six-line stanzaic form for poetry (the form of "Ruth"): "The first verses from which he [Wordsworth] remembered to have received great pleasure, were Miss Carter's 'Poem on Spring', a poem in the six-line stanza, which he was particularly fond of, and had composed much in, for example, 'Ruth'" (Butler and Green 389). Wordsworth himself, in a note to the poem (line 58), writes that William Bartram's *Travels Through North and South Carolina, Georgia* was a specific influence on the poem. For instance, the frontispiece and description of strawberry gathering and the landscape (ll. 14-18, 43-60), bear a remarkable resemblance to Bartram's description of the same (288-89). Charles C. Coe writes that Bartram, like Ruth's husband, found that "the sylvan scene of primitive innocence was enchanting, and perhaps too enticing for the hearty young men long to continue idle spectators" (289), giving a basis for the character as well. Finally, a last possible source is William Godwin's *Memoirs of the Author of the Vindication of the Rights of Women*, which details Mary Wollstonecraft's emotional problems and two suicide attempts after being rejected by Gilbert Imlay. Wordsworth received a copy of this book on April 14, 1798 (*Journals* 13). It is also possible that Wordsworth read

Wollstonecraft's own *Letters Written from Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*, where she describes the healing properties of nature.

Thematically, the poem bears parallels to "The Thorn" and "The Mad Mother", two other ballads in the collection that also focus on female characters with mental illnesses. A number of critics have also noted the similarities between this poem and other ballads known to Wordsworth at the time. For instance, Beatty suggests that the stanzaic form of Ruth (sestameter) imitates that of Michael Drayton's "Dowsabell" in Percy's *Reliques*. She also argues that there are thematic parallels in other ballads; for instance, the character of Ruth resembles female characters in "Waly, Waly" and "Lady Anne Bothwell's Lament", and the figure of the husband resembles characters in "Gilderoy" and "The Gaberlunzie Man" (Butler and Green 390).

The poem was quite well received when it was released in the 1800 version of *Lyrical Ballads*, when Samuel Taylor Coleridge called it "the finest poem in the collection" (390). Despite this and other glowing endorsements, the poem underwent a number of alterations in later versions of *Lyrical Ballads* and other poetry collections Wordsworth published in subsequent years. Wordsworth changed the poem in the 1802 version of *Lyrical Ballads*, changed it back to the 1800 version in the 1805 publication, and then revised it again in 1817 and 1820 (390). The changed 1802 version left Coleridge puzzled, and he described the problems with the revised version of "Ruth" as "a sort of ventriloquism in poetry": "Wordsworth had not originally put into the mouth of the lover many of the sentiments he now entertains, and which would better have become the poet himself" (390). His largest issue with the poem, then, was the change from the narration to the placement of feelings in conversation, which he believed took away from

the quality of the poem. As the subsequent versions of *Lyrical Ballads* are not the

subjects of this study, I will not spend much time on these revisions, though they are

noteworthy.

Moreover, this poem metrically resembles the ballad more closely than any other

poem in this sequence. While the stanzas are six lines each, the third and sixth lines are

both trimeters, characteristic of the second and fourth lines of the ballad stanza. The

other lines in the stanza are tetrameters, also characteristic of the first and third lines of

the ballad stanza. So, the stanzas of "Ruth" are essentially ballad stanzas, except that the

tetrameter lines are doubled, creating six-line stanzas (like the "Michael Ballad").

I classify "Ruth" as an anti-ballad (with "Poor Susan") for its refusal to let its

female character be punished for a possible sexual transgression. Unlike "Poor Susan",

however, this poem is much more involved in its characterizations of the main male and

female characters, and bears more similarities to the ballad tradition. Wordsworth

positions Ruth quite clearly as a bard figure in the second stanza of the poem:

> And she had made a pipe of straw
> And from that oaten pipe could draw
> All sounds of winds and floods;
> Had built a bower upon the green,
> As if she from her birth had been
> An Infant of the woods. (ll. 7-12)

In these lines, Ruth's status as the bard figure is quite clear – she is described with a

"pipe of straw", a tool many bards and ballad-singers would use (a pipe or lute) to

accompany their singing. This is also a key feature of a pastoral shepherd, a figure who

is often depicted with some sort of instrument in the pastoral works of Theocritus and

Virgil. Moreover, the speaker notes that Ruth *made* this pipe of straw, solidifying her

authentic status as bard – it is not something she just found, but had a hand in crafting,

reminding us of the peasant/farmer figure. It is important to note as well that this pipe is described as an "oaten pipe" that can "draw/ All sounds of winds and floods" (ll. 8-9). Thus, the instrument can play any tune (even "nature"), an important distinction from the pipe that will be described at the end of the poem.

The next stanzas (nearly twenty) are devoted to a description of Ruth's male suitor in the poem and his words to her. He is a "Youth from Georgia's shore" (l. 13) who "Among the Indians…had fought" (l. 38). Interestingly, Ruth is silent throughout the entire poem – though the narrator describes her thoughts and actions, she never speaks. The male character, however, speaks to Ruth when he describes the beauty of the landscape and proposes marriage to her. In his description of the landscape, he tells Ruth

> …"How sweet it were
> A fisher or a hunter there,
> A gardener in the shade,
> Still wandering with an easy mind
> To build a household fire and find
> A home in every glade." (ll. 67-72)

I call attention to this stanza because of the serenity and peace that Ruth's suitor is able to find in nature. Unlike the wandering Jew, his "wandering" nature grants him an "easy mind", and suggests that it would be wonderful to be a fisher, hunter, or gardener – all outdoor occupations. Moreover, this line serves as an important foreshadowing to the fate of their marriage – in the end, this "youth" will always be a wanderer at heart.

This understanding of nature as a place in which one can remain calm and forget about her woes is continued in the next stanza:

> What days and what sweet years! Ah me!
> Our life were life indeed, with thee
> So pass'd in quiet bliss,
> And all the while" said he "to know
> That we were in a world of woe,

On such an earth as this!" (ll. 73-79)

Here, Ruth's suitor tells her how wonderful it would be to remain in nature and spend their days "in quiet bliss", seemingly unaware of the "world of woe" that exists outside of their utopian bubble. This also reflects the common theme in these poems of both being hopeful about the state that they are in and then realizing that their situation actually seems quite hopeless – the "world of woe" is just around the corner.

After his proposal, Ruth and her suitor marry, removing the possibility for Ruth to become a fallen woman. Yet, almost immediately after this marriage, her suitor becomes immoral, turning into a "slave of low desires" (l. 147). Even though they had both dreamed and had the possibility of a wonderful life together, Wordsworth writes

> But now the pleasant dream was gone,
> No hope, no wish remain'd, not one,
> They stirr'd him now no more,
> New objects did new pleasure give
> And once again he wish'd to live
> As lawless as before. (ll. 157-162)

Hopelessness characterizes this stanza – negative words litter the entire passage: "gone", "no hope", and "no more". Even with this dire language, however, the stanza actually serves as the turning point of the poem, when the focus shifts from the suitor toward Ruth herself.

In the last ten stanzas of the poem, we learn of Ruth's fate after the dissolution of her marriage. After her suitor deserts her (l. 168), we learn that she goes mad six months later:

> "God help thee Ruth!" – Such pains she had
> That she in half a year was mad
> And in a prison hous'd,
> And there, exulting in her wrongs,
> Among the music of her songs

> She fearfully carouz'd. (ll. 169-174)

There is an important shift here in the place of Ruth's music in her life – whereas before she was able to play any tune she wanted, now she is "exulting in her wrongs/ Among the music of her songs/ She fearfully carouz'd". The verb "carouse" has a negative connotation in this last line, as it is modified by "fearfully" – it seems as though her "oaten pipe" is no longer able to draw "all sounds of winds and floods".

Yet, the situation is not completely hopeless for Ruth – she stays in prison for only nine months, when she is finally freed:

> When Ruth three seasons thus had lain
> There came a respite to her pain
> She from her prison fled;
> But of the Vagrant none took thought,
> And where it liked her best she sought
> Her shelter and her bread. (ll. 181-186)

Markley argues that Ruth's "three seasons" in the mad house serve as a symbolic pregnancy and that a "new Ruth" is born after these lines: "Ruth as outcast and vagrant" (31). Ruth's status as an "outcast" here is not necessarily a bad thing, however. Ruth feels a "respite to her pain" after she leaves prison. While this does not seem like anything out of the ordinary (surely anyone would want to be out of a madhouse), it is important that she flees towards the forest, where she had felt most comfortable before, and that both her leaving of that bad location and return to the most wonderful location are what lead to his respite. This is solidified in the next stanza, in which we learn that nature, in fact, has healing powers for Ruth:

> Among the fields she breath'd again:
> The master-current of her brain
> Ran permanent and free,
> And to the pleasant Banks of Tone
> She took her way, to dwell alone

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Under the green wood tree. (ll. 187-192)

The speaker tells us that "among the fields she breath'd again" – nature gives Ruth the ability to live not only "free", but "permanent" as well, leading us to believe that nature will serve as her permanent, wonderful home. Nature has healing powers, and serves as the only place in which Ruth can really feel at peace and at home – the same calm place that her suitor described earlier in the poem. While calm, though, it is at the same time quite lonely.

At the same time, the speaker does not let the audience forget that nature, in fact, was the cause of Ruth's problems. Ruth does feel the same way, however – she loves it so much that she is willing to forgive it:

> The engines of her grief, the tools
> That shap'd her sorrow, rocks and pools,
> And airs that gently stir
> The vernal leaves, she loved them still,
> Nor ever tax'd them with the ill
> Which had been done to her. (ll. 193-97)

There is a seeming contradiction in this stanza – on the one hand, the speaker describes nature and its elements as "the engines of her grief, the tools/ That shap'd her sorrow", giving them the power to cause her misfortune. At the end of the stanza, however, the speaker describes that she never "tax'd them with the ill/ Which had been done to her". Even though this seems contradictory, it is the speaker who describes nature as causing her grief, not Ruth, who loves it so much that she does not blame them for her misfortunes. In a way, Ruth returns here to her previous naivety, living in nature, alone, even though this identification with nature earlier, and her suitor's love of it, caused her madness.

Yet all is not hopeful, as it has not yet been with any of these poems. In the third

to last stanza, the speaker describes the new state of Ruth's instrument:

> That oaten pipe of hers is mute
> Or thrown away, but with a flute
> Her loneliness she cheers;
> This flute is made of a hemlock stalk
> At evening in his homeward walk
> The Quantock Woodman hears. (ll. 211-216)

The oaten pipe is no more – it is either "mute" or "thrown away". Either way, is has been

replaced with a flute that "cheers" her loneliness – a loneliness she had not felt earlier in

the poem. This does not seem like a bad transformation though, until the reader gets to

the next line, in which the speaker tells us that "this flute is made of a hemlock stalk".

The line is startling, as the poisonous flute is not only starkly different from the oaten

pipe of before, but also contradicts the seeming hopefulness of Ruth's condition. While

she is free and healed, it seems as though loneliness might get the best of her.

In the last two stanzas of the poem, the narrator steps out from the story and

speaks directly to the reader, offering his own observations of Ruth:

> I, too have pass'd her on the hills
> Setting her little water-mills
> By spouts and fountains wild,
> Such small machinery as she turn'd
> Ere she had wept, ere she had mourn'd
> A young and happy Child!
>
> Farewell! and when thy days are told
> Ill-fated Ruth! in hallow'd mold
> Thy corpse shall buried be,
> For thee a funeral bell shall ring,
> And all the congregation sing
> A Christian psalm for thee. (ll. 217-228)

While at first it seems as though Ruth will be able to live in nature, in the end, there

seems to be little hope for Ruth and her way of life – unlike the other poems, in which

some hope remained at their end, Ruth's fate is completely devastating. Referring to her as "ill-fated" Ruth, there is little room for the healing powers of nature.

At the end of this poem, Wordsworth attempts to insert some hope in the form of Christianity. This attempt to turn to a Christian community for comfort also reflects the move Wordsworth makes in each of the poems discussed in this chapter towards identification. In each poem, Wordsworth urges the reader to identify with the characters that he presents, to mourn alongside each of them for a lost way of life. He demonstrates that their hardships are not so far from the reader's own, and that we can all share in these experiences. The "language of men" allows for this identification – whether it be with a specific character or with nature. The "Christian psalm" in "Ruth" is quite out of place here, though, and seems in fact to be a weak attempt on Wordsworth's part to continue with his "anti-ballad" theme, pushing against the traditional dark endings of the ballads, rather than an urging toward identification (especially in light of the fact that Wordsworth rejected this kind of identification in the "Song for the Wandering Jew"). This need to ameliorate the darkness occurs in both "Poor Susan" and "The Idiot Boy", but it does not fail in those poems. The turn to Christianity is bald – a weak attempt, at best. Hartman notes that the closure *Lyrical Ballads* brings its reader to is "fraught with tensions and contradictions that were already beginning to emerge as critical issues" (70). The fragility continues – but, by the end of this sequence, hope is waning, and it is unlikely to return. We are now past the sense of hope that characterizes "The Idiot Boy" and "Poor Susan", and have moved closer to that of "The Brothers". Instead of optimistically hoping for a continuance of this way of life, we mourn for its loss.

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Conclusion

One of the anxieties that characterized many of Wordsworth's compositions was the fact that, while he had grown up in the Lake District, Wordsworth was not actually one of the "rustics" he featured as the protagonists of so many of his poems. McEathron writes, "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' who nonetheless presumed to give priority to his own ideal of rustic speech" (5). This has been a common criticism of the poet – how could he purport to write "authentically" about the "low and rustic" classes when in fact he had no experience of his own in this way of life? Coleridge accuses Wordsworth's poetry of being, in fact, *in*authentic: "…the persons introduced are by no means taken *from low or rustic life* in the common acceptation of those words" (43). These kinds of criticisms would lead us to believe that the entire purpose of the collection was all for naught – that, as an outsider, Wordsworth could never *truly* depict these scenes and characters authentically.

Yet, if the analysis of the sequence of poems in the last chapter of this thesis has shown us anything, it is that Wordsworth does not need to be a member of that class to be able to authentically represent it, because the struggles of "low and rustic" life are in fact the same struggles that we all share. In nearly every poem in this analysis, Wordsworth urges his readers to identify and sympathize with the characters and situations he presents, knowing that we all have experiences similar to those depicted. I have argued throughout this thesis that all of the poems depict a way of life lost and the mourning that follows from this loss. Alan Liu describes the poetry in this collection as "a work of mourning" that registers "not just the loss of particular history but…the fact that history

considered universally *is* loss" (155). The "low and rustic" people were not the only ones who suffered from the loss of oral tradition and enclosure – Wordsworth's readers also lost that history, and thus can share in the same loss and mourn for it as well.

Furthermore, the object of this thesis has been to demonstrate that Wordsworth's success in this identification between his readers and the subjects he depicts in the poems of the *Lyrical Ballads* lies in the transformation of the genre and modal characteristics in each composition. Owen describes Wordsworth's project as one of permanence: "Wordsworth seeks to write a poetry the subject-matter of which shall be of permanent interest; he seeks, similarly, to use a language which shall be permanently intelligible, or as near that as possible" (12). Wordsworth achieves this aim by simultaneously employing and rejecting characteristics of the ballad genre and pastoral mode. On the one hand, adhering to closely to either ballad or pastoral conventions creates an inauthenticity in the poem, as we saw in "The Ballad Michael". Yet, by carefully choosing certain characteristics of each of these, Wordsworth creates the kind of poetry that is permanent – that is, with which readers well past the eighteenth century can identify. These influences simultaneously authentically depict and elevate the subjects of the poems – thus, readers are apt to accept Wordsworth's challenge to identify with these subjects. The hybridization of genres that he employs draws his readers to these elevated yet authentic characters and depictions, and these same characteristics also facilitate his readers' identification with these subjects, allowing us to see and identify with the commonality of the human condition.

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