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Peter Miller

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William Wordsworth and the Invention of Culture

PETER MILLER

This article on the relation of poetic form to literary history opens with the first lines from two poems, which should be read aloud:

Five years have passed; five summers, with the length
Of five long winters! and again I hear
These waters, rolling from their mountain-springs
With a sweet inland murmur.

Oh! what's the matter? what's the matter?
What is't that ails young Harry Gill?
That evermore his teeth they chatter,
Chatter, chatter, chatter still.¹

Many readers will readily identify the author of these verses as William Wordsworth. Some will further name the collection in which they first appeared, *Lyrical Ballads, with a Few Other Poems* (1798). But I want to wipe clean the literary historical slate, for a moment, and confront these specimens with uninitiated eyes and ears. I want us to notice how markedly different each poem feels at the level of prosodic execution. The first excerpt luxuriates in the subtle sonic terrain of enjambed blank verse, its three uses of “five” making sure we appreciate the space afforded by Miltonic pentameter. The second excerpt, by contrast, with its heavy-footed rhymes, dense phonemic patterning, and insistent tetrameter, could have come from the pen of Edgar Allan Poe, blasphemous though this undoubtedly sounds. Indeed, if asked

Peter Miller is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Virginia. His dissertation considers how poets and their books adapt in an age of modern sound recording.

for generic labels, we might tag the first excerpt a lyric, and the second excerpt a ballad—poetic genres that today we would likely place on opposite ends of the literary seriousness spectrum.

My opening pairing, then, is meant to jar our palate and in so doing anticipate the larger argument to come: namely, that Wordsworth in *Lyrical Ballads* makes two discrete, and dissonant, commitments at the level of poetic form, and that these commitments reflect a larger dissonance in his work between poetry as real subjectivity and poetry as real human difference. I make this claim in support of a trickier but more rewarding one: that by bringing under the same tent these dual commitments to subjectivity and difference, Wordsworth establishes a poetic field school of sorts, one whose formal features emulate the kind of human contact on which the modern notion of culture depends. Or more accurately, Wordsworth's poetry dramatizes a tension inherent to the concept of culture consisting in the fact that while culture would appear to be a discernible set of human traits tied to, if not determined by, the places and people we come from, culture is also the very act of discerning these different traits in others. Culture, that is, requires an other culture. So Wordsworth's poetry, this article will argue, requires other imagined subjectivities, the reality of which, once audited by the poet and his readers, orients literary expression under the banner of culture.

I. THE REAL LANGUAGE OF MEN

"Tintern Abbey" and "Goody Blake, and Harry Gill" represent formal extremes within *Lyrical Ballads*. Most poems are not as palpably dissimilar. Nonetheless, this pairing highlights a generic gambit afoot throughout the collection whereby each poem invites its reader to classify it either as one of the titular "*Ballads*" or as one of the "*Other Poems*" mentioned in the title's less-cited second half. Luckily, most poems walk a prosodic beat, so it is not hard to label the ones in rhyming four-beat lines as ballads and the handful of poems in blank verse as others. By their meters we shall know them.

But not in all cases. Consider this stanza from "Lines Written at a Small Distance from My House":

No joyless forms shall regulate
 Our living Calendar:
 We from to-day, my friend, will date
 The opening of the year.

(p. 22, lines 17–20)

This stanza feels as if it comes from a ballad. The *abab* rhymes are there as we would expect, and the meter keeps us moving musically along. But something is off. A philosophical bent seems to have co-opted this genre known for crowd-pleasing narrative. At the same time, poems in the rightfully philosophic meter of blank verse appear to have wasted their figure on vulgar fare, as when the father and son of “Michael”

Turn'd to their cleanly supper-board, and there
 Each with a mess of pottage and skimm'd milk,
 Sate round their basket pil'd with oaten cakes,
 And their plain home-made cheese.

(p. 148, lines 101–4)

“[H]ome-made” indeed, possibly bootlegged. Wordsworth was well aware that his generic dalliance would rub some readers the wrong way,² and in hindsight we rightly conclude that his chief accomplishment in *Lyrical Ballads* was “to adapt the ballad to portraying precisely those states and feelings least susceptible to narrative presentation” while simultaneously “democratizing ... blank verse.”³ The action-centric ballad gains the psychological inwardness we identify with modern subjectivity, and blank verse is brought down to earth to smell the daffodils. When we trace the origins of a recognizably modern poetics to Wordsworth, we tend to ground our assessment in this double generic modification.

Criticism has been less concerned, however, with the structural relationship between these two poetic meters, between the newly self-actualized ballads and the always already modern blank verse.⁴ Aiming at this relationship, this article reads *Lyrical Ballads* not on a poem-by-poem basis, but as a contest between ballad meter and blank verse. This kind of intermetrical approach helps avoid the pitfall of defining Wordsworth’s modernity as a merely thematic update—new wine in old wineskins—that we verify secondarily via prosodic analysis of individual lines, stanzas, or poems. Instead, this approach traces the larger prosodic gestalts that certain meters establish over time in different interpretive communities. It builds on the detailed historical scholarship that has contextualized Wordsworth’s turn to ballad meter within the broader ballad revival of the eighteenth century, but focuses less on the poet’s thematic departures than on what Simon Jarvis has called the “local expressive forces that individual prosodic gestures may take on or develop in particular authorships, coterie, periods, and genres.”⁵ Most basically, this approach works

to answer two key questions: what is the structural relationship of ballad meter to blank verse in *Lyrical Ballads*, and how has this relationship in turn structured our sense of Wordsworth's achievement?

To begin answering these questions, we might treat *Lyrical Ballads* as a kind of polarized generic field in which poems signify in relation to readers' beliefs about ballads and blank verse. Some poems sit relatively squarely in the former category, such as "Goody Blake, and Harry Gill," while others reside in the latter, such as "Tintern Abbey." Some play psychological content off balladic form, such as "Lines Written at a Small Distance from My House," while others gentrify rustic content with blank verse, such as "Michael." And some poems hover near the center of the generic field, their hybrid status complicating the very idea of binary classification. The opening lines of "The Female Vagrant," for instance, find Wordsworth all but acknowledging his generic double-dealing:

By Derwent's side my Father's cottage stood,
 (The Woman thus her artless story told)
 One field, a flock, and what the neighbouring flood
 Supplied, to him were more than mines of gold.
(p. 11, lines 1-4)

After just two lines, we might think this is blank verse, though things feel a bit too iambic, too end-stopped, and too narrative to be sure. Plus, the rhyme word "flood" at the end of line 3 seems odd. Where did our speaker say she is from again? Suspicions that we are chatting with a balladeer in disguise are allayed, temporarily, by the heavy enjambment of "flood / Supplied," which buries the rhyme and the earlier faux pas. But no sooner are we back on cordial terms than "Supplied" itself supplies another rhyme with "side" in line 1. And the more we listen, the more the last two lines seem to rewrite themselves into tetrameter, against the visual grain, to better suit their sound and syntax: "And what the neighbouring flood supplied, / To him were more than mines of gold." In fact, "The Female Vagrant" is written in Spenserian stanzas of nine lines, of which I excerpted only the first four. Not quite ballad meter nor blank verse, though reminiscent of both, Spenser's form, we should recall, burst onto the scene with equally strong commitments to rhyming action-packed narrative, on the one hand, and upper-crust Englishness itself, on the other, in its inaugural role in an allegorical epic glorifying, if only officially,

Queen Elizabeth I. Poems such as “The Female Vagrant,” in other words, awkwardly foot the metrical line spanning the collection’s more stable poles of ballad meter and blank verse to shore up rather than weaken the polarized generic field that organizes readings of *Lyrical Ballads*.

Wordsworth’s most famous work of literary self-criticism, the “Preface” to the 1800 *Lyrical Ballads*, is frustratingly coy about the collection’s metrical superstructure. Though he invokes meter frequently, and though he attacks critics who “under-rate the power of metre in itself,” Wordsworth makes no distinction between ballad meter and blank verse (p. 90). Instead he takes diction as his chief concern in a more general comparison of poetry to prose, concluding that “except with reference to the meter ... some of the most interesting parts of the best poems will be found to be strictly the language of prose” (p. 82). To illustrate this claim, Wordsworth quotes a sonnet by Thomas Gray, italicizing its five most prosaic lines as “the only part ... of any value,” before qualifying this linguistic claim even further (p. 83). Chiding Samuel Johnson’s parody of a ballad included in Thomas Percy’s *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765), Wordsworth observes that the parody can be impugned “[n]ot from the metre, not from the language, not from the order of the words; but the *matter* expressed in Dr. Johnson’s stanza is contemptible ... it is neither interesting in itself, nor can *lead* to any thing interesting; the images neither originate in that sane state of feeling which arises out of thought, nor can excite thought or feeling in the Reader” (p. 94). Poetry for Wordsworth must be, most basically, interesting, by virtue of its closeness to authentic human feeling, whereas meter functions as a final touch, an ornament “superadded” to enhance pleasure and memory (p. 84). “Why trouble yourself about the species till you have previously decided upon the genus?” asks Wordsworth, suggesting Johnson had missed the forest of poetical feeling for the trees of metrical speech: “Why take pains to prove that an Ape is not a Newton when it is self-evident that he is not a man” (p. 94).

The problem, for Wordsworth, was that his first readers kept finding the landscapes of *Lyrical Ballads* populated by both apes and Newtons, by both primitive and civilized poetic forms whose pasts had a way of catching up with them. Charles Burney offers the starkest appraisal of the situation: “Would it not be degrading poetry, as well as the English language, to go back to the barbarous and uncouth numbers of Chaucer? Suppose, instead of modernizing the old bard, that the sweet and polished

measures, on lofty subjects, of Dryden, Pope, and Gray, were to be transmuted into the dialect and versification of the xivth century? Should we be gainers by the retrogradation? ... None but savages have submitted to eat acorns after corn was found."⁶ To Burney, Wordsworth's retrofitting of old-fashioned ballad meters is an affront to "a higher species of versification," namely blank verse, developed in England over hundreds of years, and so an affront to modernity itself.⁷ Poems, like peoples, must progress. Most perplexing to Burney is that the author of *Lyrical Ballads* is clearly capable of this higher species of composition. "Tintern Abbey" he calls "[t]he reflections of no common mind," a tour de force rendition of "poetical, beautiful, and philosophical" sentiments unknown, ironically, to the rustic folk featured in much of the collection.⁸ "Is it not to education and the culture of the mind that we owe the raptures which the author so well describes, as arising from the view of beautiful scenery, and sublime objects of nature enjoyed in tranquillity?"⁹

Reviews such as this one remind us that poetic modernization is a relational process. One becomes modern by diagnosing another's nonmodernity, by favoring corn to acorns, as it were. Most striking in Burney's review is his turn to the language of cultural imperialism and pseudoethnography to back his personal aesthetic preferences. Wordsworth's ballads are not just bad; they are savage. It goes without saying that Burney does not intend these remarks as careful treatments of cultural or racial difference, but we should note how his crude metaphors nonetheless serve a unified purpose, that of collating various markers of human difference to articulate a theory of poetry. This theory ties blank verse to a progressive, enlightened poetics and balladry to a retrograde barbarism. A figure such as Goody Blake, though presumably just as Anglo-English as Burney himself, is accordingly seen to suffer from a debilitating social backwardness that "should have been relieved out of the *two millions* annually allowed by the state to the poor of this country, not by the plunder of an individual."¹⁰ Tellingly, another reviewer, one who enjoyed "Goody Blake, and Harry Gill," also grounds his enthusiasm in the poem's purported sociophysiological accuracy. In a near quotation of Wordsworth, the reviewer calls it "a tale founded on a well authenticated fact, which happened in Warwickshire. Dr. Darwin relates it among other curious instances of maniacal hallucination in the second volume of his *Zoonomia*."¹¹ What might first seem to be a merely formal dichotomy in Wordsworth's collection—between ballads and blank verse—is revealed in the

early reception history to be an ideological one. Generic difference indexes readers' beliefs about economic, intellectual, and racial difference, and the ballads in particular either appeal or offend by virtue of being somehow underdeveloped.

For Wordsworth, of course, this underdevelopment is precisely what makes his subjects more essentially human, more interesting, and thus more basically poetic. As he elaborates in the 1800 "Preface,"

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; because in that situation our elementary feelings exist in a state of greater simplicity and consequently may be more accurately contemplated and more forcibly communicated; because the manners of rural life germinate from those elementary feelings; and from the necessary character of rural occupations are more easily comprehended; and are more durable; and lastly, because in that situation the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature.

(p. 78)

Wordsworth is here drawing conspicuously on early anthropological thought, a discourse that informs his project from start to finish. As Alan Bewell observes, "At the core of Wordsworth's poetry is an anthropological vision, explicit in the notion of *The Recluse* as a 'philosophical poem, containing views of Man, Nature, and Society,' a concern with how human beings, individually and as a species, made the transition from a state of nature to society."¹² Bewell's excellent book, *Wordsworth and the Enlightenment*, lends much to my own study, particularly Bewell's observation that the "interactive, participatory mode of observation" that characterizes modern ethnographic fieldwork also characterizes much of Wordsworth's poetry. The poems, Bewell elaborates, offer "narratives in which the imagination constructs scenes, situations, or modes of feeling that have the status of experiments."¹³ This assessment seems entirely sound, and I wish simply to add that Wordsworth's anthropological mode operates not only in the narrative space within poems, but also as a structural relationship between classes of poems within *Lyrical Ballads*, between the "[l]ow and rustic" ballads and the "higher species" of blank verse.

Attending to this structural aspect of Wordsworth's anthropological mode productively qualifies his famous claim in the 1802 "Preface" that his poetry reflects "the real language of men," a claim whose ethnographic ambitions critics have justifiably questioned (p. 90). Susan J. Wolfson argues that Wordsworth, when he acknowledges in passing that his raw linguistic materials required some "fitting" to poetic meter, reveals that "a poetic 'real' has replaced the socially 'real'" as the object of his project (p. 76).¹⁴ Wolfson's critique is compelling because we know Wordsworth is not an actual anthropologist, not someone who can claim a professional interest in the "socially 'real.'" Yet our eagerness to delimit Wordsworth's qualifications can blind us to the fact that his work frequently does expose the poetic—that is to say formal—constraints under which modern scholars of culture operate. Following Clifford Geertz, contemporary anthropologists have stressed the degree to which fieldworkers are not simply neutral collectors of cultural data but active participants in the production of culture as such.¹⁵ It is in this sense that Wordsworth's poems, in which would-be ethnographic encounters are always metonymies for the self, reveal the decidedly real social processes by which Western anthropology and poetics alike fashion the cultural forms they take as their objects. Rather than privileging the poetic over the social, then, Wordsworth's poems might be seen to dramatize how poetic, formal structures underwrite ostensibly objective representations of human otherness across a variety of disciplinary formations.

This is an admittedly large and somewhat abstract claim, but Wordsworth's poetry backs it up by repeatedly focusing attention on the specific intersubjective encounters on which such claims are founded. "We Are Seven," for example, shows how a decidedly local disagreement can nonetheless hinge on matters of life and death:

A simple child, dear brother Jim,
That lightly draws its breath,
And feels its life in every limb,
What should it know of death?

(p. 28, lines 1–4)

"We Are Seven" plays the collective plurality of its title off the single-mindedly rational voice of its poet-narrator, who discerns a "rustic, woodland air" about his young interlocutor and in so doing provides evidence of what Bewell understands as Wordsworth's

anthropological mode (p. 28, line 9). In the context of the present study, we might further read the local intellectual sparring of “We Are Seven” in relation to the more global intergeneric sparring happening between poetic forms in *Lyrical Ballads*: the rustic girl’s communitarian insistence on being one of seven siblings—four away from home, three nearby—opposes her enlightened interviewer’s argument for five siblings, just as the seven beats of a balladic couplet oppose the five subtler beats of a line of blank verse. This reading might also help explain the poem’s singular formatting: after sixteen ballad quatrains, “We Are Seven” concludes with an ungainly five-liner. That is, while the rustic girl is allowed to voice her refrain once more in the poem’s last line, and so gets the last word, the poet-anthropologist retains the right to shape her words, after the fact, as he sees fit.

II. THE INVENTION OF CULTURE

How does this anthropological mode operate when Wordsworth is himself the object of study? Three months after taking the 1798 manuscript of *Lyrical Ballads* to press, Wordsworth began writing what would become his great autobiographical epic, *The Prelude*. At the outset of this poem, the poet disappointedly concedes that the epic genre’s traditional ground in collective cultural history is rather picked over, that there is

No little band of yet remembered names
Whom I, in perfect confidence, might hope
To summon back from lonesome banishment.

(p. 171, book 1, lines 173–5)

Yet this almost debilitating anxiety of influence becomes Wordsworth’s counterintuitive jumping-off point, and instead of telling the story of, say, the English or the Romans, he decides to tell “Some Tale from my own heart, more near akin / To my own passions and habitual thoughts” (p. 173, book 1, lines 224–5). Wordsworth’s opting out of the model of epic as collective history, however, would seem to cause problems for the genre. As Herbert F. Tucker observes, “it is the very idea of epic to tell a sponsoring culture its own story, from a vantage whose privilege transpires through the successful articulation of a collective identity that links origins to destinies by way of heroic values in imagined action.”¹⁶ If Wordsworth is only talking about himself, then whose culture is he speaking for?

In this section I compare *Lyrical Ballads* to *The Prelude* to suggest that the subject of the latter work can be thought of as culture itself. That is, the poem proceeds by recollecting the formal, intersubjective experiences that shape one's sense of singular selfhood within a larger human community. Adapting Tucker's definition of epic, we could say that Wordsworth's poem tells a sponsoring poet his own story, a story whose heroic action is not a collective political victory but rather the more mundane, solitary triumph of remembering and reimagining the places and people one comes from. Before turning to the poem itself, however, we should pause for a moment to tease out with greater precision the multiple meanings of culture that have now come into play. For as I hope to demonstrate, the historical and semantic multiplicity of the modern culture concept bears an important relation to the formal structures of Wordsworth's poetry.

As Raymond Williams observes, "Culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language," a word whose meaning shifted profoundly across the century that saw the publication and canonization of Wordsworth's poetry.¹⁷ Originating in the fifteenth century as "a noun of process" referring to "the tending of something, basically crops or animals," the word "culture" by the end of the nineteenth century had expanded to include a distinctly modern, anthropological definition, first articulated for the English-speaking world by Edward B. Tylor as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society."¹⁸ Alongside these two definitions was a third, which saw culture as an "independent and abstract noun which describes the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity."¹⁹ Culture, that is, as *paideia*, as education, a definition Matthew Arnold evokes in his famous sense of culture as "an inward condition of the mind and spirit" cultivated by reading "the best which has been thought and said in the world."²⁰ All of these definitions were in the air in England and Europe to varying degrees across the nineteenth century, leading Williams to conclude that culture is most properly thought of as a "complex of senses," which itself "indicates a complex argument about the relations between general human development and a particular way of life, and between both and the works and practices of art and intelligence."²¹

Williams was one of the earliest proponents of what could be called a postmodern definition of culture in that his description operates in critical relation to the modern definition codified by

figures such as Tylor. Echoing Williams's sense of culture as "argument," anthropologists in recent decades have suggested that culture denotes not simply the traits common to a group of people but also the very process of discerning these traits in others. Roy Wagner articulates this thesis forcefully in his influential study *The Invention of Culture*, which places first-person experience at the heart of the ethnographic encounter. "An anthropologist *experiences*," Wagner writes, "in one way or another, the subject of his study; he does so through the world of his own meanings, and then uses this meaningful experience to communicate an understanding to those of his own culture."²² Wagner approaches culture not as a set of things, but as a dialectic of action and knowledge, subject and object, verb and noun.

This dialectical framework, which directs attention toward the subjective and socially motivated parameters under which ethnographic fieldwork happens, provides a useful tool for reading Wordsworth's poetry. Indeed, much of *The Invention of Culture* reads as a diagnosis of the intellectual and linguistic problems that most fascinate the poet, as when Wagner observes that an anthropologist "'participate[s]' in the subject culture, not in the way a native does, but as someone who is simultaneously enveloped in his own world of meanings, *and these meanings will also participate*."²³ This observation could easily describe any number of Wordsworth's poems—surely "enveloped in his own world of meanings" could be a motto—but it recalls specifically the "Note to *The Thorn*" the poet added in 1800 after realizing the poem's ethnographic parameters had not been adequately glossed. This note explains that the poem's seafaring protagonist is "not a native" of the rural village in which he finds himself and thus, having "become credulous and talkative from indolence" at sea, offers Wordsworth "a character ... to exhibit some of the general laws by which superstition acts upon the mind" (p. 38). Wordsworth, in other words, is after culture as Tylor would have it—"general laws" evinced by specific human traits—but seems also to acknowledge, anticipating Wagner, that this sense of culture derives equally from the very act of intersubjective contact, wherein nativity emerges in the experience of human difference.

The difference between the modern and postmodern forms of culture, defined respectively by Tylor and Wagner, is most visible in Wordsworth's poetry, I suggest, as the formal difference between *Lyrical Ballads* and *The Prelude*. For whereas *Lyrical Ballads*, as the early reception history attests, establishes a generic polarity between savage ballad meter and enlightened blank verse, between

cultural objects and cultural agents, *The Prelude* attempts to synthesize this polarity within the bounds of a single poetic structure and single mind, to translate a problem of bifurcated poetic form into a parable of integrated consciousness. Wordsworth describes the challenge at hand in a famous passage from book 2:

so wide appears
The vacancy between me and those days,
Which yet have such self-presence in my mind
That, sometimes, when I think of them I seem
Two consciousnesses, conscious of myself
And of some other Being.

(p. 184, lines 28–33)

In the dominant critical interpretation, Wordsworth's remembered child-self is an intimate of an unfallen state of nature to which the adult poet's modernity forbids return. As Geoffrey H. Hartman writes in his pathbreaking study, Wordsworth's poetry is "apocalyptic," fueled by "an inner necessity to cast out nature, to extirpate everything apparently external to salvation."²⁴ Significant for the present study is the fact that the child sacrificed in the name of imaginative modernity is figured, in some of the earliest lines composed for *The Prelude*, as not simply temporally but racially—culturally—displaced. Reminiscing about days spent splashing in rivers, running through fields, and bronzing under the sun, Wordsworth says it was

as if I had been born
On Indian Plains, and from my Mother's hut
Had run abroad in wantonness, to sport,
A naked Savage, in the thunder shower.

(pp. 174–5, book 1, lines 304–7)

Here and elsewhere in *The Prelude*, it is as if the numerous others of *Lyrical Ballads*—vagrants, Indian women, convicts, children—are taken from their native habitats and conscripted to serve as metaphorical proxies for Wordsworth's former self.

In intuiting a relationship between the discourse of psychological metacognition—"Two consciousnesses"—and the discourse of early anthropology—"naked Savage"—Wordsworth illuminates the generative paradox that cultural anthropologists would locate over a century later at the heart of their discipline, which takes

as its object real human difference while acknowledging that this difference always arrives refracted through the lens of real subjectivity. Attempting to account for this paradox, Wagner suggests that “an anthropologist ‘invents’ the culture he believes himself to be studying, that the relation is more ‘real’ for being his particular acts and experiences than the things it ‘relates’ ... Before this he had no culture ... since the culture in which one grows up is never really ‘visible’—it is taken for granted, and its assumptions are felt to be self-evident. It is only through ‘invention’ of this kind that the abstract significance of culture (and of many another concept) can be grasped, and only through the experienced contrast that his own culture becomes ‘visible.’”²⁵ It would be difficult to find a better summary of the task Wordsworth sets himself in *The Prelude*, a “Hard task,” he sighs in book 2, since

Not only general habits and desires,
 But each most obvious and particular thought,

 Hath no beginning.

(p. 189, lines 233–7)

“How shall I trace the history, where seek / The origin of what I then have felt?” (p. 192, book 2, lines 365–6). Read against Wagner, Wordsworth’s self-fashioning as “naked Savage” is simply one of the more striking instances of the larger aesthetic operation whereby the poet invents the cultural origin he is studying, his adult difference from which allows an enlightened identity to become visible in the present.

Any number of further instances could be adduced to demonstrate that the egotism of *The Prelude* is actually deeply dependent on other people.²⁶ It was, we should recall, simply a poem “Addressed to S. T. Coleridge” during Wordsworth’s lifetime (p. 167). One instance in particular has special bearing on this discussion. I am thinking of Wordsworth’s version of the self-affirming underworld descent, the *katabasis*, a stock convention of epic, which the poet renders in book 7 as a phantasmagoria of urban multiculturalism. After sighting an Italian, a Jew, and a Turk in the “thickening hubub” of London, Wordsworth incorporates these figures into an expressly ethnographic catalog that includes

all specimens of Man
 Through all the colours which the sun bestows,
 And every character of form and face,
 The Swede, the Russian; from the genial south
 The Frenchman and the Spaniard; from remote
 America the hunter Indian; Moors,
 Malays, Lascars, the Tartar and Chinese,
 And Negro Ladies in white muslin gowns.

(p. 265, lines 227 and 236–43)

In lines enjambed and prosodically varied to the point that audible poetic form all but gives way to prosaic enumeration, Wordsworth's concern is not the individual identities of these racial and national others but their role in a taxonomy—a representation of representation itself—that affirms in aggregate the possibility of identity for the poet himself. If Wagner is correct that “[i]n the act of inventing another culture, the anthropologist invents his own,” then Wordsworth renders London as a nexus of unnerving human otherness in order to generate a proportionally powerful confirmation of his own selfhood.²⁷ *The Prelude*, from this perspective, translates the public, ideologically charged, intergeneric contest of *Lyrical Ballads*—between ballads and blank verse—into a private contest between primitive and enlightened versions of the same mind.

That Wordsworth during his lifetime refrained from publishing what is now considered his masterpiece suggests that his sense of this achievement was rather different from ours. And if culture is the object of *The Prelude*, then the poet seems not to have realized it. For Wordsworth, his poem was simply a private intellectual warm-up for the more properly philosophical poem to come. In hindsight of course we feel Wordsworth had it backward. What he thought he would achieve in *The Recluse*—a theory of “Man, Nature, and Society”—he had already stumbled into in *The Prelude*. And when Wordsworth names imagination, and not culture, as the object of his poem he exposes the conundrum that had become apparent by 1805, when the thirteen-book version was completed. For if the poem was just a spur toward imaginative maturity, then the aesthetic value of the textualized memories he had put down on paper is cast in serious doubt. In his final turn to Samuel Taylor Coleridge in *The Prelude*, Wordsworth claims that

what we have loved
 Others will love; and we may teach them how,
 Instruct them how the mind of Man becomes
 A thousand times more beautiful than the earth
 On which he dwells.

(p. 377, book 13, lines 444–8)

But this exhortation does not seem quite right, since what *The Prelude* finally suggests, as a whole, is that our sense of who we are and where we come from cannot finally be taught. It must rather be imagined—or “invented,” in Wagner’s vocabulary.²⁸ Imagination, from this perspective, is the mode of Wordsworth’s poetry, not its object. The poetry’s object might be more accurately thought of as culture, whose implication in both objective reality and subjective experience positively defines the formal achievement of *The Prelude* even while rendering this achievement opaque to Wordsworth in his own time.²⁹ Indeed, much of the poem’s continuing appeal derives from the way its confessedly fraught textual status accentuates the elegance with which it charts the growth of a poet’s mind. In this, *The Prelude*’s form contrasts markedly with that of *Lyrical Ballads*, whose generic bifurcation sustains the impression that human otherness is something external to the cultured self as opposed to its precondition.

III. WORDSWORTH AND THE CULTURE OF LYRIC

I opened this article by suggesting that “Tintern Abbey” and “Goody Blake, and Harry Gill” might be classed as a lyric and a ballad, respectively, but in the pages that followed I avoided the term “lyric” in describing Wordsworth’s poetry. I invoke it again now to suggest that assumptions about the poet’s essential lyricism have discouraged discussion of Wordsworth in terms of culture and, conversely, that the rubric of culture can help clarify the nature and limits of the poet’s lyricism.

Wordsworth himself is partly to blame. When, at the end of *The Prelude*, he places “the mind of Man” above “the earth / On which he dwells,” he suggests a preference for such characteristically lyric poetic traits as interiority and metacognition over and against the communal and acoustic traits associated with balladry. As noted above, many of Wordsworth’s first readers found the poet’s lyric mode preferable to his ballads, and critics including Coleridge and John Stuart Mill affirmed this general consensus. Coleridge argues that “[t]he best part of human language ... is derived from

reflection on the acts of the mind itself,” and thus the “*supposed* characteristics” of Wordsworth’s poetry—simplicity, nature, and rustic life—are not its “*real* characteristics.”³⁰ Mill, similarly, echoing the closing passage of *The Prelude*, suggests that a preference for true—meaning lyric—poetry over primitive balladry correlates with a preference for “the world within” over “outward things.”³¹ “[T]he poetry of one who is a poet by nature,” Mill writes, meaning a poet by innate mental disposition, “will be clearly and broadly distinguishable from the poetry of mere culture.”³²

Critics closer to our own day have tended to agree that the strongest aspects of Wordsworth’s poetry are essentially lyrical, concerned with inward intellectual processes rather than the “outward things” of culture.³³ It was a New Critical commonplace that the lyrical inflection of Wordsworth’s ballads was what made them innovative, an assessment bolstered by the more properly lyrical longer poems that provided M. H. Abrams archetypes for “the greater Romantic lyric.”³⁴ A generation later, the greatness that midcentury critics had discovered in Wordsworth’s lyricism could be reinterpreted by certain historicist critics as the measure of an equally great misreading of history. Marjorie Levinson’s polemical reading of “Tintern Abbey” as the poet’s consummate attempt to deny socioeconomic history and then “hide [the poem’s] omission of the historical” remains the most influential example of a criticism that made the Wordsworthian lyric the tool and icon of a broad cultural cover-up.³⁵ More recently, proponents of the new lyric studies have extended and revised this brand of historically oriented criticism by interrogating the transhistorical stability of the moniker “lyric” as such, suggesting that even if Wordsworth did write in multiple distinct poetic genres, then modern literary criticism has effectively lyricized his work into a single ur-genre.³⁶

Though different in many important ways, these approaches consolidate an assumption that the work lyric performs can be understood according to broadly interpretive and historical protocols. Whether arguing that a poem is wrought well enough to brave time, that it is formed in a way that cunningly misrepresents historical fact, or that it is the ideological product of sustained reading practices, these approaches together suggest that “lyric” both names and conjures an aesthetic unity that allows a poem to be fruitfully compared, either positively or negatively, against other discursive fields. To a large extent, as Virginia Jackson has argued, this unity emerges from, and reflects back, the material affordances of print and the kinds of discrete, referential knowledge it enables.³⁷ Jackson’s work, and that of the new lyric

studies generally, is valuable for challenging critics to question the normativity of lyric as the de facto mode of modern poetry. At the same time, the heady historicism of this work can also have the unintended effect of casting as naive any transhistorical readings of poems by anyone other than the most historically savvy genre theorist.

Responding to this potential limitation, poetry scholars are exploring alternate models for reading and teaching poetry.³⁸ Jonathan Culler's landmark study *Theory of the Lyric*, for instance, stresses the nonmimetic, ritualistic, and enunciative aspects of poetic language to mount a "defense of the lyric as a general category."³⁹ This defense, Culler explains, "is not a claim for sameness but the promotion of a framework within which a history and/or pedagogy of lyric possibilities can be explored."⁴⁰ Culler's book offers a learned and pragmatic contribution to work in historical poetics, but its multilingual and historically capacious scope leaves little room to explore more local issues of poetry's relation to material culture. Culler acknowledges as much when he notes that, while his study takes the long view on lyric, "genres have a dual orientation, diachronic and synchronic, toward a historical tradition and toward a function in the cultural system of a particular historical period."⁴¹ While not posed as a problem of media history, the bidirectionality Culler ascribes to all generic models underscores a central question of poetic mediation: namely, how can we honor the special invitation poems offer us to revoice them in what Culler calls "an iterable *now* of lyric enunciation," while also honoring the fact that for a poem to have any ontological status beyond its barest definition as a string of words it must also be considered within the social-material processes that established its text and ensured its transmission into the present?⁴² This is arguably the chief challenge literary historians face, committed as we are to literature as both lived aesthetic experience and traceable historical phenomenon.

Needless to say, this question cannot be put to rest in the remainder of this article, but it can help frame my discussion of Wordsworth and draw out its larger significance. To elaborate what I have argued above, when Wordsworth published in 1798 a collection called *Lyrical Ballads*, whose title was as generically confusing then as it is today, the poet signaled the book's participation in multiple historical modes of literary mediation.⁴³ Appropriate to the formal unevenness suggested by the title, the book contains two classes of poems, and whether we call these "*Lyrical Ballads*" and "*Other Poems*," four-beat ballads and blank

verse lyrics, or indeed apples and oranges, the salient point is that the poems establish a generic polarity that readers perceive first as a matter of poetic form and second as a matter of literary decorum. Wordsworth does not call his ballads “*Reliques*,” as Percy did a generation earlier, because his poems are brand new.⁴⁴ Rather, by adopting the traditional balladic verse structure developed in oral custom, juxtaposing this structure with blank verse, and then playing newly democratized and subjective subject matter off both these verse forms, Wordsworth emulates in a poetic register the kind of generative intersubjective contact on which a modern sense of culture defines itself. Writing on the cusp of an age of mass print, one whose modernity depended in no small part on classifying language’s acoustic, embodied, and mnemonic functions as characteristically primitive, Wordsworth published a book of poems that calls attention to what we might call the “secondary orality” according to which printed ballads signify in a post-Gutenberg era.⁴⁵ “Lyric,” to the extent that it denotes the obverse of balladry in a period of expanding literacy, indeed begins to be increasingly linked with traits such as introversion and discursive thought. But as Wordsworth’s work demonstrates, poets have always found ways of using bibliographical tools to transgress the generic limits these same tools impose on a phenomenon as transhistorical and multimedial as poetry. That said, that *The Prelude* had no properly bibliographical existence during Wordsworth’s lifetime is evidence that a strictly modern sense of lyric—inward gazing yet historically framed, private yet printed—remained something to be discovered by the next generation of poets.⁴⁶

With all this in mind, how can a critic responsibly compare poetic works of different aesthetic registers, time periods, and even media ecosystems? Prosody offers one way forward. Naming both the sound of poetic language and a reader’s analytical engagement with that sound, prosody gains its power by begging questions of media theory and psychology as well as linguistics and poetics. The claim I have advanced in this article, cast in its most ambitious terms, is that Wordsworth’s poetry suggests that prosody is to poetic form as culture is to human bodies, for each term names a concept that is at once the method of inquiry and its object. As we read a poem, we mediate between phonetic forms and semantic meanings, and their relation defines the poetic function as such. Similarly, as we encounter other people, we register not only objective human traits but also our own conscious intellection of those traits; in the process, we invent a sense of culture for ourselves and for others.

Wordsworth suggests a link between prosody and culture in “Resolution and Independence,” a poem collected in *Poems, in Two Volumes* (1807) in which the poet, crossing a moor, encounters an old man gathering leeches. Wordsworth figures the leech gatherer’s selfhood as a kind of Newtonian equilibrium: “A more than human weight upon his frame ... Himself he propp’d, his body, limbs, and face, / Upon a long grey Staff” (p. 399, lines 77–9). This balancing of suprahuman and nonhuman forces gains a prosodic valence as the leech gatherer reads a pool of water “As if he had been reading in a book” and speaks “in solemn order” words “above the reach / Of ordinary men” (p. 400, lines 88, 100, and 102–3). And then,

The Old Man still stood talking by my side;
 But now his voice to me was like a stream
 Scarce heard; nor word from word could I divide;
 And the whole Body of the man did seem
 Like one whom I had met with in a dream;
 Or like a Man from some far region sent;
 To give me human strength, and strong admonishment.
(p. 400, lines 113–9)

After the remarkable welling up of stresses in “The Old Man still stood talking,” which obligingly subdivides into discrete linguistic bits, Wordsworth’s prosodic edge ironically fails him—“nor word from word could I divide”—at the very moment his own speech becomes mellifluously iambic. Semantics slip into phonetics as the leech gatherer’s identity slips into nature, his spondaic “whole Body” granted objective heft in inverse proportion to the poet’s dreamlike subjectivity. As Hugh Kenner suggests, “The incompatibility Wordsworth had discovered between *speech* and *people who seem to be things* is the special case of some radical incompatibility between language and the silent world where things appear.”⁴⁷ Incompatible in one sense, but in another sense codependent, if never simultaneously visible—for what Kenner puts his finger on is the vital oscillation of Wordsworth’s poetry between subjectivity and difference, language and things, lyrics and ballads.

Inquiring into the generic status of “Resolution and Independence,” we find the poem is written in rhyme royal, which, like the Spenserian stanza I cited earlier, fruitfully confuses attempts at classification with its mixture of pentameter lines and varied rhymes. Something similar could be said of the leech gatherer himself, who encultures the poet by confusing attempts at cul-

tural classification. Passing judgment on whether a given poem of Wordsworth's is a lyric or a ballad may finally be less generative than asking how lyrical and balladic commitments together define the formal limits within which his poetics operates. To keep this dialectic in mind—to move between poetry as something that rewards discursive interpretation and poetry as a performative act—would enrich the dominant critical tendency to read poems as bearers of thematic and historical information. Poems, like people, can and do bear history, but this history is enmeshed with forms of culture we ourselves create. That such forms are imaginary does not make them less real, but rather reminds us of our responsibility in the invention of poetic and cultural meaning as such, a responsibility that must accept its fair share of strong admonishment, but that, at its best, can give human strength too.

NOTES

¹ William Wordsworth, "Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey," in *Wordsworth's Poetry and Prose: Authoritative Texts, Criticism*, ed. Nicholas Halmi, Norton Critical Editions (New York: W. W. Norton, 2014), pp. 65–70, lines 1–4; and Wordsworth, "Goody Blake, and Harry Gill," in *Wordsworth's Poetry and Prose*, pp. 18–21, lines 1–4. Subsequent references to Wordsworth's poetry and prose are from this edition; they will be identified by title and will appear parenthetically in the text and notes by page number and, where applicable, book and/or line number.

² In the "Advertisement" to the first edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth acknowledges that readers "will perhaps frequently have to struggle with feelings of strangeness and awkwardness: they will look round for poetry, and will be induced to enquire by what species of courtesy these attempts can be permitted to assume that title" (p. 8).

³ Mary Jacobus, *Tradition and Experiment in Wordsworth's "Lyrical Ballads" (1798)* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), p. 233; and Susan J. Wolfson, "Wordsworth's Craft," in *The Cambridge Companion to Wordsworth*, ed. Stephen Gill (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2003), pp. 108–24, 114.

⁴ The most compelling reading of the ideological ascendancy of pentameter over ballad meter is Antony Easthope, *Poetry as Discourse* (London: Methuen, 1983), though Easthope does not comment specifically on the metrical polarity running through *Lyrical Ballads*.

⁵ Simon Jarvis, "For a Poetics of Verse," in "Literary Criticism for the Twenty-First Century," special issue, *PMLA* 125, 4 (October 2010): 931–5, 934. For a contextualization of Wordsworth's turn to ballad meter, see Jacobus, pp. 209–32; and Ian Newman, "Moderation in the *Lyrical Ballads*: Wordsworth and the Ballad Debates of the 1790s," *SiR* 55, 2 (Summer 2016): 185–210.

⁶ Charles Burney, unsigned review, *Monthly Review* 29 (June 1799): 202–10, rpt. in *William Wordsworth: The Critical Heritage, Volume I: 1793–1820*, ed. Robert Woof, Critical Heritage Series, gen. ed. B. C. Southam (New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. 74–8, 74.

⁷ Burney, p. 74.

⁸ Burney, p. 78.

⁹ Burney, p. 78.

¹⁰ Burney, p. 76.

¹¹ Unsigned review, *Analytical Review* 28, 6 (December 1798): 583–7, rpt. in *William Wordsworth: The Critical Heritage*, pp. 68–9, 69.

¹² Alan Bewell, *Wordsworth and the Enlightenment: Nature, Man, and Society in the Experimental Poetry* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1989), p. ix.

¹³ Bewell, pp. 34 and 44.

¹⁴ Wolfson, p. 116. For an account of Wordsworth's language's relation to the real, see Alexander Regier, "Language," in *William Wordsworth in Context*, ed. Andrew Bennett (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2015), pp. 275–82.

¹⁵ See Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), p. 5.

¹⁶ Herbert F. Tucker, *Epic: Britain's Heroic Muse, 1790–1910* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2008), p. 13.

¹⁷ Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1976), p. 76.

¹⁸ Williams, p. 77; and Edward B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom*, 2 vols. (London: John Murray, 1871), 1:1.

¹⁹ Williams, p. 80.

²⁰ Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy: An Essay in Political and Social Criticism* (London: Smith, Elder, 1869), pp. 14 and viii.

²¹ Williams, pp. 80–1.

²² Roy Wagner, *The Invention of Culture*, rev. edn. (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 3.

²³ Wagner, p. 8.

²⁴ Geoffrey H. Hartman, *Wordsworth's Poetry, 1787–1814* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1971), p. 49.

²⁵ Wagner, p. 4.

²⁶ Some of the more significant examples of the dependence of Wordsworth's egotism on other people would include the "infant Babe" in book 2 (p. 189, line 237); the discharged soldier returning from the West Indies in book 4 (pp. 220–3); the Boy of Winander in book 5 (pp. 233–4); Wordsworth's partner in the alps, Robert Jones, in book 6 (pp. 248–50); the French soldier Michel Beaupuy in book 9 (pp. 305–6); and of course Dorothy Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

²⁷ Wagner, p. 4.

²⁸ Wagner, p. 12.

²⁹ In seeking to reconcile objective and subjective commitments in Wordsworth I am following Jarvis's effort in *Wordsworth's Philosophic Song* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2007), which argues that "it is mistaken to assume that poetic thinking and materialist thinking must be opposites" (p. 4). My key term "culture" achieves something comparable to Jarvis's notion of "poetic thinking," which he finds most vital in Wordsworth when it attempts to discriminate "between imagination and idolatry," and between subjective experience and objective facticity (p. 221). Jarvis concludes that the object of Wordsworth's poetry is that which "is indubitably real and lived in experience" (p. 223).

³⁰ Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria: Or, Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions* (New York: Leavitt, Lord, 1834), pp. 203 and 250.

³¹ John Stuart Mill, *Dissertations and Discussions: Political, Philosophical, and Historical*, 2 vols. (London: John W. Parker and Son, 1859), 1:66.

³² Mill, 1:79.

³³ For recent work concerned with the meaning of lyric in Wordsworth, see the chapters by Stefan H. Uhlig and Peter de Bolla in *Wordsworth's Poetic Theory: Knowledge, Language, Experience*, ed. Regier and Uhlig (New York: Palgrave, 2010), pp. 36–42 and 43–60.

³⁴ M. H. Abrams, "Structure and Style in the Greater Romantic Lyric," in *The Correspondent Breeze: Essays on English Romanticism* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1984), pp. 76–108, 80.

³⁵ Marjorie Levinson, *Wordsworth's Great Period Poems: Four Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1986), p. 39. See also Alan Liu, *Wordsworth: The Sense of History* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1989), p. 223. For a skeptical response to these historicist readings, see Helen Vendler, "Tintern Abbey: Two Assaults," in "Wordsworth in Context," ed. Pauline Fletcher and John Murphy, special issue, *BuR* 36, 1 (1992): 173–90.

³⁶ The history of "lyricization" has been most forcefully articulated by Virginia Jackson in *Dickinson's Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2005), pp. 1–15, 6. See also Jackson's entry "Lyric," in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. in chief Roland Greene, gen. ed. Stephen Cushman, 4th edn. (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2012), pp. 826–34; and Jackson and Yopie Prins, eds., *The Lyric Theory Reader: A Critical Anthology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2014).

³⁷ See Jackson, *Dickinson's Misery*, esp. pp. 235–40.

³⁸ See for instance recent articles by Stephen Burt, "What Is This Thing Called Lyric?," *MP* 113, 3 (February 2016): 422–40; and Jahan Ramazani, "The Local Poem in a Global Age," *Critl* 43, 3 (Spring 2017): 670–96.

³⁹ Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* (Cambridge MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2015), p. 246.

⁴⁰ Culler, p. 246.

⁴¹ Culler, p. 47.

⁴² Culler, p. 289.

⁴³ Though we may today see lyrics and ballads as basically different kinds of poetry, one early reader, John Stoddart, clearly felt otherwise: "The title of the Poems is, in some degree, objectionable; for what Ballads are not *Lyri-cal*? Besides, there are many compositions in blank verse, not at all *Lyri-cal*" ([Stoddart], *British Critic* 17 [February 1801]: 125–31, in *William Wordsworth: The Critical Heritage*, pp. 138–43, 143n). As Jackson observes in her entry in the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, "rather than consolidating a sense of poetry as *lyric*, the 19th-c. definition of the lyric was deeply confused" ("Lyric," p. 831).

⁴⁴ See Thomas Percy, *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry: Consisting of Old Heroic Ballads, Songs, and Other Pieces of Our Earlier Poets (Chiefly of the Lyric Kind)* (London: J. Dodsley, 1765).

⁴⁵ Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, New Accents, gen. ed. Terence Hawkes (London: Methuen, 1982), p. 3. Ong coins the term "secondary orality" to describe "the orality of telephones, radio,

and television” and other modern electronic technologies (p. 3), but the term also aptly describes the interplay between oral and civilized metrical forms in *Lyrical Ballads*. On the application of the notion of orality to Wordsworth’s forms, see Frances Ferguson, “Writing and Orality around 1800: ‘Speakers,’ ‘Readers,’ and Wordsworth’s ‘The Thorn,’” in *Wordsworth’s Poetic Theory*, pp. 119–38.

⁴⁶On this discovery by members of this next generation, Robert Browning in particular, see Tucker, “Dramatic Monologue and the Overhearing of Lyric,” in *The Lyric Theory Reader*, pp. 144–56. It should be noted that for Tucker, as for Browning, this discovery comprised a critique of lyric as articulated by Mill and others. But as Jackson has argued, this critique was itself effectively subsumed into the ascendant genre (“Lyric,” p. 832).

⁴⁷Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1971), p. 26.