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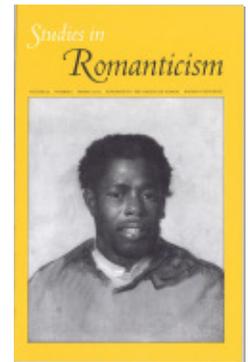
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The Influence of Anxiety: Spenser and Wordsworth

We poets in our youth begin in gladness,
But thereof in the end come despondency and madness.

IN THE MONTHS BETWEEN LATE 1801 AND THE SUMMER OF 1802, A REMARKABLY productive period for Wordsworth and one filled with alternating hopes and fears over advancing age, the lawsuit to recover the modest patrimony so long withheld by Lord Lonsdale, thoughts of impending marriage, and the need to visit Annette and Caroline in France, the Wordsworths and Mary Hutchinson were frequently found deep in Spenser. On November 16, Dorothy reports, "Wm somewhat weakish, but upon the whole pretty well—he is now at 7 o'clock reading Spenser."¹ Two days later, "We sat in the house in the morning reading Spenser"; and on the 24th, "After tea Wm read Spenser now & then a little aloud to us." At the start of the next month, Dorothy writes, "In the afternoon we sate by the fire—I read Chaucer aloud, & Mary read the first canto of the *Fairy Queene*" (Dec. 6). On the following March 16, "After dinner I read him to sleep—I read Spenser while he leaned upon my shoulder"; and on April 25, "we spent the morning in the orchard. Read the *Prothalamium* of Spenser—walked backwards & forwards." On June 4, Dorothy "read *Mother Hubbards Tale* before I went to bed"; on the 16th, Dorothy "read the first canto of the *Faerie Queen* to William," who "went to bed immediately"; and finally on July 1, "William read Spenser."² If the "Spenser" which at one point had to be retrieved from a river bank where the poet had left it (Dec. 28, 1801) was actually a close-fitting short jacket and not a book,³ it was a garment well named.

A number of poems came almost immediately out of this immersion in Spenser's works. Wordsworth clearly had paid close attention to Spenser's

1. Dorothy Wordsworth, *The Grasmere Journals*, ed. Pamela Woof (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 38.

2. D. Wordsworth, *Grasmere Journals*, 39, 41, 45, 79, 91, 105, 110, 117.

3. *Grasmere Journals*, 53, 192.

Colin Clouts Come Home Againe, which suggested the arresting image of the pagan god Triton rising from the sea in the sonnet "The World is Too Much With Us," probably written or begun in May or June 1802—as was perhaps also the sonnet "Pelion and Ossa," Wordsworth's attempt to outdo Spenser's tribute to classical peaks in *Virgils Gnat* (lines 21–24) by singing his own Skiddaw with its "streams more sweet than Castaly."⁴ The poem "Beggars," written in March 1802 though based on a meeting with a beggar woman (that "tall weed of glorious feature") and her wild sons nearly two years previously, clearly owes something in phrasing and idea to a reading of Spenser's *Muiopotmos* (lines 209–13), where a bold, carefree young butterfly in an idyllic landscape proves vulnerable to death.⁵ The carefree first half of Spenser's poem also informs Wordsworth's opening hopes in "Home at Grasmere" about 1799–1800 (lines 1–35), as well as a passage of Book 10 of the 1805 *Prelude* as annotated by Jonathan Wordsworth, where the poet, troubled by the revolution's failure, hopes for a metamorphosis of "worm-like" man into a winged state of "Liberty," becoming "Lord of himself in undisturbed delight" (lines 835–38).⁶

I have reserved for last as the center of my discussion the most famous of the group of poems written during this period of readings in Spenser. This is the work that began life under the title of "The Leech-Gatherer" in May 1802 and became in final form in June/July 1802 the powerful "Resolution and Independence," whose full Spenserian nature has yet to be understood.

Despite the many filiations recognized (or as yet unrecognized) in the poetry of these and other years, Spenser has generally taken a back seat to Milton in accounts of Wordsworth's primary influences. If he was set "very early" by his father—before age 8, when his father died—to learn "by heart" and "repeat large portions of Shakespeare, Milton, and Spenser," and if as a youth resolving to be a poet he "feared competition only with Chaucer; Spenser; Shakespeare and Milton,"⁷ Wordsworth's search for the sublime and his revolutionary sympathies have seemed to link him most closely to the Miltonic model in the minds of many, notably Harold Bloom. Bloom's theory of avoiding anxiety over a predecessor's authority by "swerv[ing]" operates in interesting fashion here. Although he concedes

4. Edmund Spenser, *Poetical Works*, ed. J. C. Smith and E. de Selincourt (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), 539, 487; William Wordsworth, *The Poems*, vol. 1, ed. John O. Hayden (London: Penguin, 1977), 568. Hereafter cited as Hayden.

5. "What more felicitie can fall to creature, / Than to enjoy delight with libertie, / And to be Lord of all the works of Nature, / To runne in th'aire from earth to highest skie, / To feed on flowers, and weeds of glorious feature . . ." (Spenser, *Poetical Works*, 518).

6. "Home at Grasmere" (*The Recluse*, Part First, esp. lines 19–45), in Hayden, 1:697–98; *The Prelude: 1799, 1805, 1850*, eds. Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill (New York: Norton, 1979), 404n.

7. Note by Isabella Fenwick, 1845, in Hayden, 1:965.

that Spenser was authoritative enough to require Milton's own swerve (in rejecting chivalric, martial epic) and pays passing tribute to Spenser's "resourceful and bewildering (even Joycean) way of subsuming his precursors . . . through his labyrinthian syncretism," Bloom concludes that Milton is Wordsworth's authority, his model for the egotistical sublime.⁸

Even critics who do not share Bloom's intensely competitive model often feel that much of Wordsworth's strength comes from his explicit alliance of himself with the sublime Milton in so many invocations and allusions. Moreover, Wordsworth's own few open declarations of homage to Spenser suggest a less obtrusive influence. In *The Prelude*, Book 1, Spenser's model of chivalric battle is passed over as a model while Milton's lost paradise seems worth the effort of restoring; and in *The Prelude*, Book 3, at Cambridge, Spenser is briefly and tepidly praised as a reclusive "sweet soul, moving through his clouded heaven / With the moon's beauty and the moon's soft pace," like a victim of enchantment, while Milton is celebrated for revolutionary ardor, temperate vigor, and courage as a blind bard amid enemies (lines 281-99). Spenser's matter appears in slightly better light in the poem "Personal Talk" (1807), praising "heavenly Una and her milk-white Lamb," a figure of wronged innocence also central to the same year's *White Doe of Rylstone* (published later, in 1815), where the preface finds the happily married Wordsworth and Mary reading over the sad tale of Una's wanderings, and admiring her supposedly meek bearing of her troubles. And in "Scorn not the sonnet" (1820), where Milton is described as producing, trumpet-like, "soul-animating strains" in the form, the sonnet "cheer[s]" the soul of "mild Spenser, / Called from Faeryland to struggle through dark ways."⁹

This impression of Spenser as an unworldly and meek endurer of suffering or an indolent recliner in the lap of beauty (cf. Coleridge in *Biographia Literaria*)¹⁰ was to some extent inherited from the eighteenth century and in particular from Thomson's *Castle of Indolence* (with its debt to Spenser's Bower of Bliss), as has been shown by Greg Kucich.¹¹ There is considerable

8. Harold Bloom, *A Map of Misreading* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 128; *The Anxiety of Influence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973); *Poetry and Repression* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 21-23. For an expansion of Bloom's theory of influence, see his *Yeats* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 4-6.

9. Hayden, vol. 2:635.

10. Coleridge traces in Spenser "a mind constitutionally tender, delicate, and . . . I had almost said, effeminate; and this additionally saddened by the unjust persecution of Burleigh, and the severe calamities, which overwhelmed his latter days. These causes have diffused over all his compositions 'a melancholy grace,' and have drawn forth occasional strains, the more pathetic from their gentleness" (*Biographia Literaria*, eds. James Engell and W. J. Bate [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983/84], 36).

11. Greg Kucich, *Keats, Shelley, and Romantic Spenserianism* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 1991), 56-62; he does note that the "moral" aspect of Spenser is also

evidence, however, that despite his reticence Wordsworth saw through this conventional picture of Spenser, finding behind it a poet who was tough, unsettling, and paradoxically inspiring. With his Miltonic bias, Bloom has claimed that Wordsworth's disturbed figures such as the Solitary in *The Excursion* derive less from Spenser than from Milton's "Penseroso" figure.¹² But it can be argued that such signature Wordsworthian figures are at base Spenserian. Far from swerving anxiously from Spenser's figures of anxiety and despair, Wordsworth thought of them, I would suggest, in ways which were both supremely useful to his art and life and oddly comforting. Spenser's famous debut as the care-worn Colin Clout of "January" and "December" in *The Shepheardes Calender* revealed him as one of the few major poets willing to own an intimate acquaintance with care and the fear of poverty¹³ and even—in his gallery of other frightening monitory figures, Redcrosse in the dungeon of Orgoglio and the cave of Despair, and the mourners in *The Ruines of Time*, *The Teares of the Muses*, and *Daphnaïda*—an acquaintance with the temptations of weariness and despair that mark both the poet's and his heroes' labors.

Spenserian stirrings have been noted in the poet of "Resolution and Independence," though of a rather different nature from those that will be agitated here. That the poem's predicament and solution derive from the *Prothalamion* has been suggested by both Samuel Schulman and Geoffrey Hartman.¹⁴ But Spenser's opening ambulatory meditation there on his disappointed court hopes concludes with a kind of recovery of spirits in the celebration of somebody else's marriage and possible future patronage—a situation that sorts oddly with the gaunt concluding apparition here of a leech-gatherer rising from the mist. Let us take our clue rather from Wordsworth's opening image of the hare "running races in her mirth" (line 11),¹⁵ an oblique allusion to the epic effort that awaits all who begin their life's "race" in high spirits but soon find, as do the heroes in the *Faerie*

present throughout Thomson's poem. Lucy Newlyn however points instead to the "gray waste" at the end of Thomson's poem, adding that his "Nightmare vision ['Gaunt Beggary and Scorne, with many hell-hounds moe']" is "in the background of Wordsworth's private fear" in "Resolution and Independence" ("Wordsworth, Coleridge, and the 'Castle of Indolence' Stanzas," *Wordsworth Circle* 12 [1981]: 106–7). For Newlyn's somber view of Wordsworth's conclusion, see below.

12. Bloom, *Poetry and Repression*, 71.

13. Lin Kelsey and Richard S. Peterson, "Rereading Colin's Broken Pipe: Spenser and the Problem of Patronage," *Spenser Studies* 14 (2000): 233–72.

14. Samuel Schulman, "The Spenserian Enchantments of Wordsworth's 'Resolution and Independence,'" *Modern Philology* 79 (1981): 24–44; Geoffrey Hartman, *Wordsworth's Poetry 1787–1814*, rev. edn. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 267–72. Schulman also finds that the bower of bliss lies behind the opening of Wordsworth's poem.

15. Hayden, 1:551. "Resolution and Independence" hereafter quoted in the text by lines.

Queene and their laboring creator, that they repeatedly have a “race to runne.”¹⁶ The hare propelled forward by careless joy may find in mid-career that it is being pursued by hunger, anxiety, and even death.

The Spenserian ambience of the setting is further heightened by the speaker’s declaration that

I was a Traveller then upon the moor;
 I saw the hare that raced about with joy;
 I heard the woods and distant waters roar;
 Or heard them not, as happy as a boy:
 The pleasant season did my heart employ:
 My old remembrances went from me wholly;
 And all the ways of men, so vain and melancholy.

But, as it sometimes chanceth, from the might
 Of joy in minds that cannot further go,
 As high as we have mounted in delight
 In our dejection do we sink as low;
 To me that morning did it happen so;
 And fears and fancies thick upon me came;
 Dim sadness—and blind thoughts, I knew not, nor could name.

(15–28)

This “moor”—and the even more explicit “moorish flood” of later lines (74)—deliberately recalls the bleak opening setting of Spenser’s *Ruines of Time*, in which the narrator, a laboring “travailer,” encounters the unsettling figure of Verulamium, or Roman London, bewailing her loss of name and fame amid a bleak landscape of “moorish fennes” (140).¹⁷

The complex interplay of Spenserian allusions embedded at the start of Wordsworth’s poem includes a rather enigmatic two-line rhetorical question in the middle of the sixth stanza of the first version in MS, following the words “My whole life I have liv’d in pleasant thought / As if life’s business were a summer mood” (36–37). The question reads: “Who will not wade to see a bridge or boat / How can he ever hope to cross the flood?”

16. *Faerie Queene*, 2.1.32; ed. Thomas P. Roche, Jr. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978), 213. Citations to *Faerie Queene* hereafter quoted in the text are from this edition. Guyon’s Palmer here exclaims to Redcrosse, who has “joy” and “fame” in completing his quest: “We, where ye have left your marke, / Must now anew begin, like race to runne.” Cf. *Amoretti* 80.1–6: “After so long a race as I haue run / Through Faery land, which those six books compile, / Give leau to rest me being halfe fordonne, / And gather to my selfe new breath awhile. / Then as a steed refreshed after toyle, / Out of my prison will I breake anew; / And stoutly will that second worke assoyle [assail]” (Spenser, *Poetical Works*, 575).

17. Spenser, *Poetical Works*, 473.

(38–39).¹⁸ The question, somewhat illogically placed (there is no need for a boat here) and suppressed in the revised versions, is, I would suggest, a subtle evocation of two important, interrelated episodes in the *Faerie Queene*. The confirmed Spenserian thinks perhaps first of the emotional extremes of Book 2, the book urging the virtue of temperance—an appropriate text for a poet who has just plummeted from the heights of joy to the depths of despair. Canto 6 brings various characters to the edge of a river or “flood” whose reactions to this barrier are instructive. The overly sensual Cymochles, wrathfully pursuing an enemy, hitches a ride on the boat of Phaedria, or Immodest Mirth, who instead of ferrying him across, whisks him off downstream to her floating island, where she sings him to sleep in a bower of warbling birds (st. 2–18). His brother Pyroches, arriving at the same “idle flood” (st. 41), burns with wrath so desperately that, without waiting for help to cross, he jumps in to try to cool himself off and nearly drowns, together with his squire who has also jumped in to try to save him (st. 42–49). When the hero Guyon, by contrast, seeks passage and is taken to Phaedria’s island, he resists her blandishments, destroys the Bower, and manages to continue his quest, exemplifying the temperate response to a flood of difficulties and temptations.

Even closer to the bone, however, is an episode in Book 1, canto 9, where the figure of Despair tempts the weary Redcrosse knight to relieve his guilt and anxiety (amassed in eight cantos of mistakes and betrayal) by crossing the final flood in suicide (st. 39):

Who travels by the wearie wandring way,
To come vnto his wished home in haste,
And meetes a flood, that doth his passage stay,
Is not great grace to helpe him ouer past,
Or free his feet, that in the myre sticke fast?
Most eniuous man, that grieues at neighbours good
And fond, that ioyest in the woe thou hast,
Why wilt not let him passe, that long hath stood
Vpon the banke, yet wilt thy selfe not passé the flood?

Despair concludes, “death after life doth greatly please. . . . Death is the end of woes: die soone, O faeries sonne” (st. 40, 47).

All of this is relevant to the central figure of the leech-gatherer, who though based on an actual meeting with a poor wanderer recorded in Dorothy’s journal two years earlier¹⁹ is given a distinctively Spenserian introduction and character: “Now, whether it were by a peculiar grace, /

18. Jared Curtis, ed., *Wordsworth's Experiments with Tradition: The Lyric Poems of 1802* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971), 188.

19. D. Wordsworth, *Grasmere Journals*, 223–24.

A leading from above, a something given . . ." (50-51); "[He seemed] like a man from some far region sent, / To give me human strength, by apt admonishment" (111-12). Several Spenserian encounters, variously gloomy or reassuring, lie in the background here. In the elegiac *Daphnaïda*, the anxiety-ridden narrator, walking abroad for a breath of fresh air, ruminates on "miserie":

There came vnto my minde a troublous thought,
Which dayly dooth my weaker wit possesse . . .
Of this worlds vainnesse and lifes wretchednesse . . .
. . . I muzed upon the miserie,
In which men liue, and I of many most,
Most miserable man. . . .

(lines 29-38)

Like the narrator in Wordsworth's poem, he meets someone worse off than himself, an apparent "Pilgrim" with "*Jaakob staffe in hand*," who is inconsolably mourning the death of his wife, and who reproaches the sympathetic narrator for not being sad enough (lines 41-42).²⁰ A number of somber passages in the *Faerie Queene* which evince despair or suicide are also to the point here: 2.10.55, 3.10.57-59, 4.7.41, 4.8.4, 4.10.20, and especially 4.3.1—"O why doe wretched men so much desire, / To draw their days vnto the utmost date, / And doe not rather wish them soone expire / Knowing the miserie of their estate. . . ?"

Yet closer to the specific anxieties of Wordsworth's speaker are those mentioned in Redcrosse's encounter with Despair, where the tempter—a scrawny, sad, death-like figure—belabors the weary hero with a catalogue of ills: "Feare, sicknesse, age, losse, labour, sorrow, grieffe, / Paine, hunger, cold, that makes the hart to quake . . ." (1.9.44). These are directly echoed, I would suggest, in Wordsworth's list of his own anxieties after some conversation with the leech-gatherer:

My former thoughts returned: the fear that kills,
And hope that is unwilling to be fed,
Cold, pain, and labor, and all fleshly ills. . . .

(113-15)

Wordsworth has achieved, however, a remarkable combination of the alarming and the healing implicit in some Spenserian figures. The leech-gatherer himself, a gatherer of things that heal in an alarming way by blood-letting, also recalls Spenser's use of the term "leaches," or physicians, as well as other healing and guiding figures. Leeches heal Redcrosse's bodily wounds in the House of Pride (1.5.44-45) and his spiritual wounds

20. Spenser, *Poetical Works*, 528.

in the House of Holinesse (1.10.24–45), and in Book 6 of the *Faerie Queene* a retired hermit skilled in “leaches craft” heals the festering wounds of victims of calumny (6.6.1–3). Moreover, Guyon’s Palmer in *Faerie Queene* 2:

a sage and sober sire . . .
Of ripest years, and haire all hoary gray,
That with a staffe his feeble steps did stire,
Least his long way his aged limbes should tire . . .
And euer with slow pace the knight did lead.

(2.1.7)

re-echoes in the figure of the leech-gatherer, “the oldest man that ever wore grey haire” (56), who “the pond / Stirred with his staff” (79; cf. “stirring thus about his feet,” 122) and whose perseverance “trouble[s]” Wordsworth:

In my mind’s eye I seemed to see him pace
About the weary moors continually,
Wandering about alone and silently. . . .

(129–31)

In short, to adapt Lady Macbeth’s words, who would have thought the old man had so much Spenser in him?

But what does this mean for the narrator himself? One might suggest that if this is Book 1, he must be Redcrosse, who should get on with his own quest with the help of Una, who snatches away the dagger offered by Despair and reminds the hero of the restoring power of “grace” (1.9.52–53). The interpolated question about ways to cross a flood, in the MS version discussed above, suggests further that the narrator is in a sense the Guyon of Book 2, the knight of temperance, navigating a steady course between extremes of passions, of pleasure and pain. The concern with the deaths of “mighty poets”—a term used by Wordsworth elsewhere as well, in the 1815 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, where Milton is termed a “mighty poet,” and in the 1805 *Prelude* (3.180–82)—further suggests that the center of the anxiety is personal and not just something indulged in for the sake of teaching Coleridge a lesson.²¹ There are too many other somber poems of Wordsworth’s written before and during this period showing similar anxieties or gloom for us to ignore the personal note. These include “Guilt and Sorrow” (“Salisbury Plain”), “No Spade for Leagues,” “The Affliction of Margaret,” “The Forsaken,” and especially “The Ruined Cottage,” where the tone is set in the ominous opening lines in which the Wanderer

21. See Thomas McFarland, “The Symbiosis of Coleridge and Wordsworth,” *SiR* 11, no. 2 (1972): 279–83; and Lucy Newlyn, *Coleridge, Wordsworth and the Language of Allusion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 118–26.

labors up a hill in the heat surrounded by a swarm of insects (*The Excursion* 1:17–25)²²—evoking (I would suggest) Spenser’s epic simile for Redcrosse encumbered by Error’s brood (1.1.23).

What then of the final effect of the poem? Some have found it inspiring, but continued trust in God is personified, as Lucy Newlyn observes, by the rather unsettling image of a gaunt, superannuated traveler. The leech-gatherer “does not merely offer comfort, but also reminds the poet of what he himself might become. . . . He is a reflex of the poet’s deepest fears, ‘wandering about alone and silently’ . . . his aloneness is a source of fear. He continues to ‘admonish,’ even as the poem ends.”²³ The last stanza’s effect is certainly less comfortable than the conclusion in a greener landscape of the contemporary “Intimations” Ode, which begins with the loss of inspiration but ends with the hope that future years may “bring the philosophic mind” (187). At the same time, the final effect is less serene than the stoic suppression of strong feeling offered in the “Ode to Duty” (1805), and, following the death of his brother John the next year, in the “Elegiac Stanzas on . . . Peele Castle.” If the concluding sentiment of “Resolution and Independence”—“God . . . be my hope and stay secure” (139)—resembles certain calm affirmations of the Wanderer throughout *The Excursion* (e.g., Book 3, *passim*, 4:1–122), the concluding image rather stirs up anxieties of the sort voiced by the Solitary in the same work.²⁴ Nor is Wordsworth suggesting here, surely, that all of his future poems must come from an avoidance of excited, imaginative, and visionary states of mind.

An instructive comparison here is the powerful but neglected companion poem “A Narrow Girdle of Rough Stones and Crag,” begun 23 July, just two months before meeting the leech-gatherer (the luckless one, who in Dorothy’s account had turned to begging and selling godly books and had lost his wife and children). Revised in October and December 1800,²⁵ the lines appeared in the *Lyrical Ballads* of the same year. Wordsworth, Dorothy and Coleridge are there shown making a leisurely, indeed indolent circuit of Grasmere Lake on the boulder-strewn margin in the days before a public road was put in,²⁶ and spinning daydreams of making their lo-

22. Hayden, 2:41.

23. Newlyn, “Wordsworth, Coleridge,” 106–7. Milton Teichman notes that the Leech-Gatherer “is an image confirming all of Wordsworth’s fears about sickness and poverty” (“Wordsworth’s Two Replies to the ‘Dejection’ Ode,” *PMLA* 86 [1971]: 983–84). Hartman too notes that Wordsworth’s conclusion is “disquieting,” and points to the poet’s questioning “whether the ‘marvelous Boy’ in him can survive being changed into the philosophic mind,” and whether poetry must die with age (*Wordsworth’s Poetry*, 268–70, 203).

24. E.g., *The Excursion* 3:956–91 (“Despondency”), (Hayden, 2: 119–20).

25. Hayden, 1:965.

26. Hayden, 1:965; Duncan Wu, *Wordsworth: An Inner Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 187.

cal flora and fauna—the windblown lazy seeds as if in “chariot[s]” and particularly the tall Queen Osmunda fern, recalling that Spenserian “weed of glorious feature,” the stately woman of “Beggars”—into poems that will equal the fame of counterparts in Grecian and Arthurian myth:

Many such there are, but chiefly that tall fern,
So stately, of the Queen Osmunda named;
Plant lovelier, in its own retired abode
On Grasmere beach, than Naiad by the side
Of Grecian brook, or Lady of the Mere,
Sole-sitting by the shores of old romance.

(33–38)

But in mid-poem, they pass some happy harvesters, and through the mist come upon an old peasant fishing by the shore of the lake. They conclude he is lazy and ought to be harvesting:

‘Improvident and reckless,’ we exclaimed,
‘The man must be, who thus can lose a day
Of the mid-harvest, when the labourer’s hire
Is ample, and some little might be stored
Wherewith to cheer him in the winter time.’²⁷

(50–54)

But suddenly he turns toward them, and they realize by his ghastly appearance that he is “too weak to labour in the harvest field,” and must instead seek “a pittance from the dead unfeeling lake / That knew not of his wants” (63–66). Coleridge too recalls the scene: “Poor fellow at a distance—idle? In this hay-time when wages are so high? [We] come near and then [see that he is] pale, can scarce speak or throw out his fishing-rod.”²⁸ They name the spot “POINT RASH JUDGMENT” because of their hasty first impression, a title that subtly veils without concealing the deeper anxieties about career and passing time presented by this particular image of future resolution and independence.

The modest Grasmerean mythmaking in the first half of this haunting poem “A Narrow Girdle” is in turn extended elsewhere, in another more inspiring circuit of a lake where the poet imagines being vouchsafed visions of “Venus rising from the sea” (*The Prelude* 4.114), in a sight of a rainbow

27. Hayden, 1:430–31. The Osmunda fern, or Moonwort, is a flowering plant growing 2–4 feet high; see William Withering, *An Arrangement of British Plants*, 3rd edn. (London, 1796), 2:762. It grows today, e.g., at the Ruskin House on Coniston Water.

28. Coleridge, *Anima Poetae*, 8; entry of July 20. In a following entry of September 1 Coleridge also summarizes and quotes from Wordsworth’s preceding lines 10–25. As Wu observes (*Wordsworth*, 176–79), at Wordsworth’s request Coleridge was supposed to write the poem but delayed, until Wordsworth finished it in time for *Lyrical Ballads*.

straddling a vale (MS W, discarded from *The Prelude* 13.195 ff. in 1805), and in the contemplation of classical deities and powers in *The Excursion* (4:858–87), a spectacle that so captivated Keats.²⁹ (Is the unfamiliar term “girdle” for the rough stones and crags surrounding the lake in Wordsworth’s opening line a subtly wry reference to the lovely girdle or ceston of Venus herself, whom the poet elsewhere imagines rising from a lake?) As for the vision of the gaunt old fisherman of “A Narrow Girdle,” who turns to face them—

we saw a Man worn down
By sickness, gaunt and lean, with sunken cheeks
And wasted limbs, his legs so long and lean
That for my single self I looked at them,
Forgetful of the body they sustained . . .³⁰

(58–62)

—he provides rather an ironic version of the fable of the grasshopper and the ant, a lesson not of careless improvidence but of the inexorable power of old age,³¹ making the poem an unexpected cautionary exploration for ambitious writers at thirty and just reaching the height of their powers.³²

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29. Hayden, 2:960n.

30. Wu notes that this description is a conscious allusion to the long-legged discharged soldier of lines 43–47 of the *Thirteen Book Prelude*. He finds the fisherman a Christ figure, or a fisher king (*Wordsworth*, 184–85).

31. Wordsworth cites the biblical version from Proverbs 6.6.11 in his 1815 Appendix to the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*: “Go to the Ant, thou sluggard, consider her ways . . . gather[ing] her food in the harvest. How long wilt thou sleep, O Sluggard? . . . So shall thy poverty come as one that travelleth. . . .”

32. In different form this essay was read at the International Wordsworth Summer Conference at Grasmere and at the International Conference of the Society for the Study of Romanticism at Duke University. I am grateful to Lin Kelsey for advice and support.

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