

1971

# Wordsworth's "Lucy" Poems

Spencer Hall

*Rhode Island College*, shall@ric.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.ric.edu/facultypublications>



Part of the [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#)

---

## Citation

Hall, S. (1971). Wordsworth's "Lucy" poems: Context and meaning. *Studies in Romanticism*, 10(3), 159-175. <https://doi.org/10.2307/25599802>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ RIC. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ RIC. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@ric.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@ric.edu).

# Wordsworth's "Lucy" Poems: Context and Meaning

SPENCER HALL

E. D. HIRSCH, in a recent book on the theory of interpretation, discusses the problem of meaning in the most famous of Wordsworth's "Lucy" poems, "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal." He points to the opposing interpretations of the last two lines of the poem—"Rolled round in earth's diurnal course,/With rocks, and stones, and trees"—put forward by F. W. Bateson and Cleanth Brooks respectively. For Bateson, the lines constitute a "climax" of "Pantheistic magnificence"; for Brooks, they suggest "dead lifelessness" and "earthly time in its most powerful and horrible image." Hirsch concludes that there is no way of reconciling these contrary emphases, both of which seem linguistically plausible; and that the only way to verify the meaning of the poem is to "establish the most probable context," by which he means "a deliberate reconstruction of the author's subjective stance to the extent that this stance is relevant to the text at hand."<sup>1</sup>

My purpose in this essay is to suggest a context for the interpretation, not only of "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal," but of the "Lucy" poems as a group. I shall argue that the meaning of these poems lies neither in despairing irony nor pantheistic affirmation, but in a humanism which borders on the tragic and whose implications are broadly relevant to an understanding of Wordsworth's poetic development. The context which I wish to propose is multi-faceted; some of these facets have been recognized, if not formulated, by other critics.

Let us begin with Wordsworth's own statements in the Preface to

1. *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967). Bateson and Brooks are quoted more fully by Hirsch on p. 228. The material quoted from Hirsch himself is on pp. 238-39. Hirsch thinks that Wordsworth's pantheistic tendencies provide the determinant context for interpreting "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal": "The poet is not an *homme moyen sensuel*; his characteristic attitudes are somewhat pantheistic. Instead of regarding rocks and stones and trees merely as inert objects, he probably regarded them in 1799 as deeply alive, as part of the immortal life of nature." According to Bateson, "stones and trees . . . had a special mystical value for Wordsworth." He cites as evidence *The Prelude*, 1805 version, III, 124-26 and 161-62, (*English Poetry: A Critical Introduction* [London: Longmans, Green, & Co., 1950], p. 29). It should be noted that Hirsch is much more tentative about Wordsworth's supposed pantheism than is Bateson. His primary interest is theoretical, and the theory of context itself is unaffected by whether the poet is or is not a pantheist. Personally, I find it difficult to think of any major poem by Wordsworth in which the "subjective stance" of the author, and thus the presumptive meaning of the poem, is pantheistic in any conceptually or aesthetically determinant way.

*Lyrical Ballads* concerning the dramatic and psychological nature of his poetic achievement. The blundering artistic failures of the speakers in several of the lyrical ballads are notorious. And yet it is clear that Wordsworth was quite consciously interested in the problems of persona and point-of-view; that he often attempted, not without some success, to manipulate the speakers of his poems for psychological and thematic effects. With this in mind, it seems reasonable to ask why Wordsworth chose a lover as the narrator of the "Lucy" poems.<sup>2</sup> The most obvious answer, of course, is that Wordsworth speaks in the person of a lover because he is writing a group of love poems stemming from a real, biographical experience. Over the past fifty years, there have been numerous attempts to pinpoint this hypothetical experience and to identify the "real" Lucy. I share the tendency of recent criticism to dismiss these attempts as irrelevant and to view the "Lucy" poems, not as disguised biography, but as essential poetic documents which concern the major theme in Wordsworth's best work, the relationship between man and nature.

What, then, is the dramatic or symbolic or philosophical meaning of the persona of the lover in the "Lucy" poems? One writer has said that Wordsworth transfers to the world of the lover the problems of temporality which are also those of the poet; both lover and poet are intimately and often tragically concerned with the limitations of mortality.<sup>3</sup> I would take this a step farther. Perhaps even more so than the poet, the lover represents a type of specifically and uncompromisingly *human* involvement in the world of process and change. The poet may—Coleridge defined him as one who did—find ways of reconciling man and nature. The lover, on the other hand, like the hero of Wordsworth's "Matthew" poems which were written contemporaneously with the first four "Lucy" poems, has only one, all-too-human being as the object of his passion. That being once dead, his loss is as total as it is definitively human. As Wordsworth says in "Three Years She Grew," there is nothing left but "the memory of what has been,/And never more will be." In contrast to the supportive, unifying, even creative powers of memory celebrated

2. Wordsworth did occasionally use a lover as speaker in other poems, most successfully, perhaps, in the extraordinarily beautiful "A Complaint." There is a lover for narrator and even a "Lucy" in "Among All Lovely Things My Love Had Been," which immediately precedes "I Travelled Among Unknown Men" in *Poems In Two Volumes* (1807). See also, "'Tis said, that some have died for love." The radical differences between the narrator-lover as used in the "Lucy" poems and as employed elsewhere in Wordsworth's poetry are, however, too manifest to require discussion here.

3. James Taaffe, "Poet and Lover in Wordsworth's 'Lucy' Poems," *MLR*, 61 (1966), 175.

in *The Prelude* and elsewhere, recollection in the "Lucy" poems is not a means of grace. It acts only to remind the lover of his loss: "But she is in her grave, and, oh,/The difference to me!" ("She Dwelt Among the Untrodden Ways").<sup>4</sup>

I find a special relevance, therefore, in the first stanza of "Strange Fits of Passion." When the speaker states that he will "dare to tell" his passion "but in the Lover's ear alone," we are alerted to more than the fact that Wordsworth plans to mine the particularly rich vein of a lover's sensibility in order to trace "the manner in which we associate ideas in a state of excitement." We are alerted, I think, to a special and fragile kind of humanism which is symbolized by the figure of the lover and which will become part, but only part, of a larger dialectic to be enacted in the "Lucy" series as a whole.

The second aspect of the interpretative context which I would establish is biographical in nature. If the identity of the "real" Lucy is largely irrelevant, the fact that Wordsworth composed the first four "Lucy" poems during his stay in Germany is not. The bleak and frustrating winter which the poet spent at Goslar in 1798-99 is a matter of common knowledge. From this problematical winter derive a number of poems which confront the implications of human death. Particularly interesting, and rather surprising given our usual notions about Wordsworth, is the range in tone which these poems display: from the elegiac poignancy of the "Matthew" poems, to the uncharacteristic satire of "A Poet's Epitaph," to the strange confusion of "To a Sexton," which vacillates unsuccessfully between the maudlin and the grotesque. Whether or not Wordsworth's characteristic attitudes were pantheistic, and I doubt that they were, the context of the four original "Lucy" poems must be thought of as a special case. Their immediate, if not ultimate, frame of reference should be defined in terms of Wordsworth's peculiar cast of thought and feeling during his stay in Germany; a cast of thought and feeling which expressed itself, in part, in a radical and at times highly idiosyncratic awareness of human death. As most commentators have perceived, it is the speaker's coming to consciousness about man's mortality, not the death of the girl *per se*, which is the subject matter of these lyrics.

4. As will be seen, this generalization does not apply to "I Travelled Among Unknown Men." My argument requires that the reader distinguish between two poetic groupings. When I refer to the "Lucy" poems or series, I mean the five lyrics conventionally denominated as such. For reasons which will become apparent, I exclude "Lucy Gray" from the series altogether. When I refer to the "first four" or "four original" "Lucy" poems, I mean to exclude "I Travelled Among Unknown Men." The reasons for making this distinction will also be made clear in the text.

The final aspect of context to which I would point is implicit in what has been said already. The "Lucy" poems (including, for reasons which will emerge later, "I Travelled Among Unknown Men") form their own context, in and of themselves. I do not mean by this that they are a unity in the impossibly theoretical, Coleridgean sense of organic wholeness; or even that their individual meanings are intelligible only when seen as part of a larger structure. This would not be true, for example, of "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal." At the same time, however, these lyrics do share common features—tonal, thematic, conceptual, imaginal, verbal, metrical—which set them apart from other poems by Wordsworth. The reader inevitably tends to approach them in at least a tentatively contextual way; and this approach, as I shall try to show, can lead to important insights of both an aesthetic and a philosophical nature. Surprisingly enough, although it is commonly observed that the "Lucy" poems are unique in Wordsworth's canon, they have almost never been meaningfully considered as an intradependent group.<sup>5</sup>

When they are thought of as a group, the problem of chronology arises. To judge by the order of Wordsworth's letters to Coleridge, in which he copied out the three poems, "Strange Fits of Passion" and "She Dwelt Among the Untrodden Ways" were written first and "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal" a little later in the winter of 1798–99 at Goslar. "Three Years She Grew" was written in the spring when Wordsworth and Dorothy had left Goslar and were walking through the Harz forest to Nordhausen. "I Travelled Among Unknown Men" was composed two years later in April, 1801.<sup>6</sup> More problematical than the chronology of composition are the differences in the order in which the poems appeared in the several editions of Wordsworth's poetry.<sup>7</sup> This is, as always with Wordsworth, a

5. To my knowledge, the only exception is the intelligent study by Taaffe. His conclusions and mine are, however, largely antithetical. Critics have tended to discuss only one, or at the most, three of the "Lucy" poems in their respective works. The most extensive commentary on all five is probably in Geoffrey Durrant, *William Wordsworth* (Cambridge University Press, 1969), pp. 60–75.

6. For information concerning the composition and the various editions of the "Lucy" poems, see, among others, Taaffe; Herbert Hartman, "Wordsworth's 'Lucy' Poems: Notes and Marginalia," *PMLA*, 49 (1934), 134–42; and Mary Moorman, *William Wordsworth: A Biography* (London: Oxford University Press, 1957), I, 422–26.

7. In the 1800 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, "Three Years She Grew" comes last and is separated by many pages from the other three. In a letter to Mary Hutchinson in 1801, Wordsworth said that "I Travelled Among Unknown Men" should be inserted third in the series, after "She Dwelt Among the Untrodden Ways" and before "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal." When it came time for the 1802 re-issue of *Lyrical Ballads*, however, Wordsworth apparently changed his

complex matter. My own position, however, is quite simple: I doubt that a specific order can be determined which would correspond in any critically meaningful fashion to a plan or perspective in Wordsworth's mind during the period of composition.

Having said this, however, there are three relevant propositions which can be established, I think, and upon which I shall base my own conclusions regarding the unity of the "Lucy" poems. First, "Strange Fits of Passion," with its "symbolism" of the lover and its dominant structural metaphor of sleep and sudden awakening, comes first in all the editions and thus sets the pattern for the four original lyrics. Second, "I Traveled Among Unknown Men," despite Wordsworth's letter to Mary Hutchinson, was written two years after the others and should not only be considered the last one in the series, but should also be thought of as a new departure which differs significantly from the four poems which precede it. Third, while I do not agree with David Ferry that "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal" "is at the powerful center of [Wordsworth's] art,"<sup>8</sup> the poem is without doubt the most complex and controversial in the series.

My plan, therefore, is to take up the four original "Lucy" poems using "A Slumber" as a point of reference. Next, I shall try to refine my notion of context by distinguishing between "A Slumber" in particular, and the "Lucy" group in general, and another lyric frequently, and wrongly, confused with them—Wordsworth's ballad of "Lucy Gray." In conclusion, I shall say something about the new direction of Wordsworth's thought as it is represented in "I Travelled Among Unknown Men."

## II

"Strange Fits of Passion" introduces the major structural and thematic elements in the first four "Lucy" poems. The "fits" which the poem recounts have nothing to do with the conventional "pas-

---

mind and wanted the poem inserted fourth, after "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal" and before "Three Years She Grew." For unknown reasons, the poem never was published in the 1802 re-issue at all, and remained unpublished until the *Poems In Two Volumes* of 1807, where it appeared by itself, the other four not being included. In the 1815 edition of Wordsworth's collected poetry, "Strange Fits of Passion," "She Dwelt Among the Untrodden Ways," and "I Travelled Among Unknown Men" were all included under "Poems Founded on the Affections." "Three Years She Grew" and "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal" were included under "Poems of the Imagination." I do not, however, find any particular relevance in this grouping for the interpretation of the poems themselves.

8. *The Limits of Mortality* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1959), p. 76.

sion" of a lover; Lucy's sexlessness has often been noted. The speaker's passion does have to do with the perception of death; it is the impending threat of mortality which causes the lover to be representative of a specially *human* sort of value. The poem does much more than assert the truism about not knowing what we have until we have lost it—although the resurrection of this truism from platitude to psychological vitality is by no means a minor artistic achievement. The reason that the speaker must suddenly perceive the reality of human death is that he has been asleep to it; and the reason he has been asleep to it is that nature has ordered it so: "In one of those sweet dreams I slept,/Kind Nature's gentlest boon!" Basically, then, the figure of the girl Lucy fades into the background. She becomes, as it were, the occasion for the primary conflict in the poem: that between the lover and nature.<sup>9</sup>

The problematical quality of the "kindness" of nature's "boon" emerges in the language and the imagery of the poem. In stanza three and again in stanza five, the speaker virtually "attaches" his eyes to the moon in such a way as to identify himself with its steady movement across the sky: "Upon the moon I fixed my eye,/All over the wide lea," "And all the while my eyes I kept/On the descending moon." In lines 7-8, the verb "bent," which could describe equally as well the moon's arc across the heavens as the path taken by the speaker, also seems to equate the motion of the moon with that of the lover as he rides to Lucy's cot: "I to her cottage bent my way,/Beneath an evening-moon." Finally, there is the carefully realized rhythm of the speaker's horse. Geoffrey Durrant, who has written perceptively about the "Lucy" poems, opposes the "intermittent nature" of the horse's hooves, which he associates with "clock-time," to the "slow and inexorable descent of the moon," which represents, he says, the inevitable approach of death (*William Wordsworth*, pp. 62-3). I am inclined to see the movements of the horse and the moon as correspondent rather than contrary. Both movements impress the reader as passive, unconscious, fated; they become objective correlatives of the sleep which nature has imposed upon the speaker (or, to vary the perspective, which the speaker has allowed to be imposed upon himself).

Whatever its origins, the defining characteristic of the speaker's

9. On one level, of course, the speaker's "sweet dreams" represent the visions to which lovers are (in literature at least) notoriously prone. They are warm, human, sympathetic, and their change into thoughts of death is the stuff of which drama is made. My point is that the situation operates on a different, less romantic, more philosophic, level as well: the speaker's dreams of love have in fact been a kind of opiate which nature has used to drown his consciousness of mortality, and thus of his own *human* identity.

sleep is lack of consciousness and thus of human identity. Having "fixed" his eyes on the moon, the "I" of the speaker is eclipsed, except in stanza five, where he reaffirms his sleepy "fixation," and in the final two lines of the poem, where he suddenly awakens to the dual awareness of death and self. The personal pronoun "I" gives way to "we" (the speaker and his horse) in the fourth stanza, and to the horse alone, "he," in the crucial sixth stanza: "My horse moved on; hoof after hoof/He raised, and never stopped." As others have noticed, moreover, the speaker's somnambulism ironically undercuts his role as a lover. Not until he puts off nature's dreams can he assume the full, human meaning of that role. It is part of a much larger irony, of course, that only the loss of the loved one (or the fear of such loss) can induce the lover to assume his proper identity.

Images of determinate motion connoting, like the figures of horse and moon in "Strange Fits of Passion," a threat to human consciousness reverberate through the first four "Lucy" poems. Such connotations are lightly and ambiguously present perhaps in the image of "untrodden ways" which Bateson has found so suggestive.<sup>10</sup> They become more pronounced in "Three Years She Grew": "Thus Nature spake—The work was done—/How soon my Lucy's *race was run!*" (italics mine). And, needless to say, they acquire full voice in the concluding lines of "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal," where "earth's diurnal course" is seen steadily and seen whole, and not, as in "Strange Fits of Passion," from the affrighted and partial perspective of a suddenly awakened mind: a mind stirred to life by intimations of mortality which must be hidden from itself in the guise of "fond and wayward thoughts."

What fond and wayward thoughts will slide  
Into a Lover's head—  
"O mercy!" to myself I cried,  
"If Lucy should be dead!"

As so often with Wordsworth, the diction here is easily parodied: "O mercy" threatens to bring to mind a host of domestic or colloquial expletives. Read properly, however, the word "mercy" should retain something of its theological heritage (see also, in this respect, the word "grace" in line 23 of "Three Years She Grew"). The lover, suddenly brought to awareness of human mortality, breathes what amounts to a desperate prayer in the final stanza, and the essential perplexity of his situation is that there is nothing or no one to heed his supplication but himself. "'O mercy!' to myself I cried": the

10. *Wordsworth: A Re-interpretation* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1954), p. 30.



personal pronoun, suggestive of individuated human identity, is now reintroduced into the poem with a vengeance. The speaker emerges from the dreams which are "kind Nature's gentlest boon" to an awareness of selfhood, but a selfhood, not only intimate with, but defined by, human loss. This same recognition of loss marks the concluding lines of "She Dwelt Among the Untrodden Ways" and "Three Years She Grew."

In all of these poems, nature would seem to betray the heart that loves her—or if she doesn't really betray, nature at least allows the speaker to believe in a quasi-immortality for Lucy which turns out to be illusionary. The promise of such an immortality in and of nature is manifest, I think, in the famous second stanza of "She Dwelt Among the Untrodden Ways." Whatever else the comparison of Lucy to a violet and a star may signify, it tacitly assures the speaker that his beloved is, like stars and flowers, a part of nature's eternity. The assurance, of course, proves to be false: "But she is in her grave, and, oh,/The difference to me!" The cleavage between human lover and nature dilates in "Three Years She Grew," the speaker and nature becoming, in effect, rivals for Lucy's love. And it is implicit in "Strange Fits of Passion" in what is left out, as well as in what remains.

I mean by this that the manuscript version of the poem includes a final stanza which was deleted for publication:

I told her this; her laughter light  
Is ringing in my ears:  
And when I think upon that night  
My eyes are dimmed with tears.

There were doubtless a number of reasons why Wordsworth cut this stanza, but I am interested here in a thematic consideration which parallels the direction of my argument. To end the lyric with a dialogue between the soon-to-die Lucy and the speaker would not only sentimentalize what is a markedly unsentimental poem, but also deflect attention from the poem's central theme. That theme is, as I see it and as I believe Wordsworth came to understand it, the problematical relationship, and ultimate conflict, between "kind Nature" and Lucy's human lover.

"Three Years She Grew," according to Herbert Hartman, is the "gospel" poem of the "Lucy" series, "elaborating as it does the influence of natural objects and piety upon the child—a philosophy," he continues, "with which the others are far less deeply interfused."<sup>11</sup>

11. Herbert Hartman, 134. The poem is, on one level, one of the most beautiful elaborations of a favorite Wordsworthian speculation: nature's education of man through contrary impulses leading to ultimate unity of being.

Undeniably, there is a magical loveliness which shadows the relationship between Lucy and nature in this lyric: "And beauty born of murmuring sound/Shall pass into her face." One suspects that the circumstances under which the poem was composed—a springtime walk through the Harz forest—have left their mark upon it. Still, the poem is related to the other three original lyrics not only by the reversal at the end, when the speaker suddenly recognizes Lucy's human mortality, but by its very "gospel" quality. Given Wordsworth's ideas about poetic diction as manifested in the *Lyrical Ballads*, a personified Nature speaking a thirty-five line apostrophe which includes such diction as "Lady" (l.6) and "virgin bosom" (l.33) would seem to suggest formality and distance, rather than loving interchange, between man and nature.

As has been said, the lover and nature actually contend for possession of Lucy, and nature's victory is signalled by the number of personal pronouns she uses in stanzas one and two:

This Child I to myself will take;  
She shall be mine, and I will make  
A Lady of my own.

Myself will to my darling be  
Both law and impulse: and with me. . . .

The lover's lone claim to possession, "How soon *my* Lucy's race was run" (*italics mine*), strikes the ear with pathetic futility, a futility heightened by the double meaning of "of my own" in stanza one. Once again, the recognition of human relationship comes only with the consciousness that such relationship is no longer possible.

Writing about "Three Years She Grew," David Ferry unveils a major interpretative problem in the first four "Lucy" poems. He says:

We are made to feel two exactly contradictory feelings: first, that it is a pity so beautiful a girl should have been taken away so young, just when she had been perfected for her life on earth; and second, that her death is justified and right, the only adequate culmination of the work Nature was doing. Even in her life on earth she was in a special communication with natural things, and before our eyes she becomes not so much a human being as a sort of compendium of nature. (*Limits*, p. 76)

The notion of contradictory feelings is a most perceptive appraisal of reader response. It seems to me, however, that Ferry has somewhat diluted the quality of the contradiction. The easily sentimentalized pity at the death of a beautiful girl, which is, of course, an elegiac commonplace, is only superficially or ostensibly operative in the "Lucy" poems. The "contradiction" which these poems exploit and

define is, most broadly, that inherently present between the human and the natural orders.

I disagree profoundly with Ferry that the thrust of the "Lucy" poems is to see "the ideal human condition" as that "of being hardly human at all," of being "one with nature" (*Limits*, p. 74). Given the reversal in the speaker's consciousness at the end of "Three Years She Grew," the fact that Lucy is more a "compendium of nature" than a "human being" would seem to be a cause for doubt and perplexity rather than celebration.

Thus Nature spake—The work was done—  
How soon my Lucy's race was run!  
She died, and left to me  
This heath, this calm, and quiet scene;  
The memory of what has been,  
And never more will be.

The *ideal* human condition is not at issue in the "Lucy" poems. The threat to being human at all is; the difficult contradiction between the life of nature and the life of man is.

We come now to the most controversial of the "Lucy" poems. "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal" differs from the three lyrics already discussed; but its differences are largely the consequence of pursuing to its inescapable conclusion the "humane" perspective which has been traced so far. Since the poem has so often been subjected to close readings by others, I shall resist the temptation to add one more analysis to the number here.<sup>12</sup> Suffice it to say that in "A Slumber" the theme of sleepy unconsciousness and sudden awakening reaches its most economical, and most powerful, structural expression.

In stanza one, the lover relives, in the past tense, his belief that Lucy was somehow deathless: "She seemed a thing that could not feel/The touch of earthly years." He calls this delusive belief a "slumber," to quote Geoffrey Hartman, "because it is not something entering his consciousness explicitly, but a dream or a supposition so deep that its existence is not revealed until the delusion is actually destroyed."<sup>13</sup> The inevitable destruction occurs; Lucy dies; and the second stanza, spoken in the present tense, records the new awareness which her death forces upon the speaker. During his "slumber" in stanza one, the lover "had no human fears" because Lucy did not seem to be a

12. Besides Bateson, Brooks, Ferry, and Durrant, see especially F. R. Leavis, "Thought and Emotional Quality," *Scrutiny*, 13 (Spring 1945), 53-5 and Paul DeMan, "The Rhetoric of Temporality," in *Interpretation*, ed. Charles S. Singleton (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1969), pp. 205-6.

13. *Wordsworth's Poetry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), p. 159.

human being. In stanza two, he becomes aware of her humanness, but only at the cost of recognizing the fact of her mortality.

One reason for the apparent power and complexity of "A Slumber" is that of all the "Lucy" poems it is both the most revelatory of the speaker's own consciousness and the only one which really considers the effect of Lucy's death on Lucy herself. In "She Dwelt Among the Untrodden Ways," Lucy "cease[s] to be," goes to "her grave," and the focus of the poem returns to the "difference" this makes in the lover's feelings. In "Strange Fits of Passion," Lucy's death is a psychological drama enacted wholly in the lover's mind. In "Three Years She Grew," Lucy's death is mentioned in a line and a third, "How soon my Lucy's race was run!/She died," and then again our attention reverts to the sorrow of the lover. In "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal," however, the entire second stanza is devoted to the sheer physical consequence of the girl's death:

No motion has she now, no force;  
She neither hears nor sees;  
Rolled round in earth's diurnal course,  
With rocks, and stones, and trees.

In the other lyrics, Lucy is effectively the creation of the speaker's mind. Her being is filtered through his memory, and he remembers her as she was alive: beautiful, vital, fragile, and yet somehow beyond the touch of temporality, like a flower. Lucy is compared to a violet in "She Dwelt Among the Untrodden Ways" and a "rose in June" in "Strange Fits Of Passion"; as Nature says in "Three Years She Grew," "A lovelier flower/On earth was never sown."<sup>14</sup> In "A Slumber," however, the speaker attempts to imagine her as she is *now*, as she is dead; when he does so, the individuated vitalism of the flower gives way to the vast astronomical indifference of "earth's diurnal course";<sup>15</sup> to the comparative inertness of "rocks, and stones, and trees";<sup>16</sup> to the grimly charnel passivity of the image, "rolled

14. Carl Woodring, in his *Wordsworth*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), p. 46, has suggested that such imagery looks back to Milton's Proserpine who "Gath'ring flow'rs/ Herself a fairer Flow'r by gloomy Dis/Was gather'd." The allusion, to *Paradise Lost*, IV, 269-71, does seem to correspond in part to Lucy's strangely ambivalent nature: at once human victim and quasi-nature goddess.

15. Technically scientific language generally has problematical, often negative, associations in Wordsworth's early poetry. Such is the case, it seems to me, with the often discussed term, "diurnal."

16. It may be as Hirsch, following Bateson, suggests, that Wordsworth regarded rocks and stones "in 1799 as deeply alive, as part of the immortal life of nature." The proper context for determining this meaning is, however, the "Lucy" poems themselves, not a presumptive pantheism. And when that context is consulted, a substantially different interpretation results.

round." The speaker comes to the deepest awareness of his own, and of Lucy's, threatened humanness precisely because he is forced beyond the interior landscape of his own mind, his own memory, to a more complete and more objective view of things. "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal" reflects one of the major tensions in Wordsworth's poetry: the never satisfactorily concluded attempt to move beyond self to an objectivity which would be both sufficient and necessary.

### III

Wordsworth's "subjective stance" in "A Slumber" can be brought out further, perhaps, by contrasting the lyric to "Lucy Gray," another poem written in the winter of 1798-99 and often thought of—wrongly, it seems to me—as part of the "Lucy" group. Irene Chayes, in her informative study, "Little Girls Lost: Problems of a Romantic Archetype," sees both Lucy Gray and the heroine of the "Lucy" poems as Romantic variants of the Persephone archetype. She compares Wordsworth's "lost girls" with Blake's Lyca:

As Lyca presumably is headed toward what was later to be particularized as Blake's Eden, so the lost Lucy Gray, mingling with the sound and motion of the moor wind, gives promise that she will eventually join her namesake, the heroine of the Lucy poems, in absorption into the Wordsworthian world-soul, to be "Rolled round in earth's diurnal course,/With rocks and stones, and trees."<sup>17</sup>

Indeed, Lucy Gray not only mingles with the wind on the moor, but seems to take possession, in and through death, of a new and fuller mode of existence. (The scepticism potentially present in "Yet some maintain" is not, I think, actualized in the poem.)

—Yet some maintain that to this day  
She is a living child;  
That you may see sweet Lucy Gray  
Upon the lonesome wild.

O'er rough and smooth she trips along,  
And never looks behind;  
And sings a solitary song  
That whistles in the wind.

17. Reproduced in *Blake: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Northrop Frye (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1966), p. 74. Miss Chayes does recognize, however, that Lucy does not have Lucy Gray's "full stature" (p. 74) as a Persephone (or Kore) archetype. Lyca is the heroine of Blake's two companion poems in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, "The Little Girl Lost" and "The Little Girl Found."

Her mysterious drowning is in symbolic fact an absorption into nature's life. Her death, in accordance with the Romantic version of the Persephone myth described by Miss Chayes, does seem to liberate Lucy Gray into a freer, more positive kind of existence.

But can the same be said of the Lucy in "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal"?

No motion has she now, no force;  
She neither hears nor sees;

Other critics have noted the emphasis which Wordsworth places upon the negatives in these lines—an emphasis which is enhanced by implicit contrast to the powers of sight, motion, and hearing which define Lucy in stanzas 3–5 of "Three Years She Grew." Unlike Lucy Gray, the heroine of the "Lucy" poems does not achieve through death a more expansive existence in nature. Lucy's relationship to nature while alive is recreated in the consciousness of the lover who cannot, like the detached, reportorial, and credulous narrator of "Lucy Gray," look beyond the bounds of mortality and human loss once she has died. And when, in "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal," the poet attempts to imagine Lucy dead, he resorts to a set of images connoting utter and hopeless passivity.

The last point is of some importance since recent criticism has come to stress an impulse toward the condition of death in Wordsworth's poetry. This impulse is one modification of the principle of permanence to which the poet was strongly attracted; its substance is an inclination towards the mysterious finality and deeply-abiding stability of the dead or dead-like; it manifests itself frequently in Wordsworth's treatment of solitaires. In "The Danish Boy," for example, which John Jones would include, along with "Lucy Gray," in the "Lucy" canon,<sup>18</sup> Wordsworth ends with the striking line: "Like a dead Boy he is serene." One recalls too the early versions of the "Intimations Ode," which so disturbed Coleridge, in which the child pictures the grave as

but a lonely bed without the sense or sight  
Of day or the warm light,  
A place of thought where we in waiting lie. . . .

18. *The Egotistical Sublime* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1960), p. 71. Jones recognizes but does not properly evaluate, it seems to me, the uniqueness of the four original "Lucy" poems:

They touch the same issues as Wordsworth's other poetry of solitude and relationship, but their extreme spirituality of tone and lack of literal context is altogether untypical. (p. 70)

While I think that the "Lucy" poems can be profitably studied in relation to Wordsworth's solitaires and to his impulse toward the death-like, there is an essential qualification to be made. Like Lucy Gray, even like the buried children in "We are Seven," the Danish Boy retains the aura of an individuated human identity; he sings, he plays his harp, he observes the changes in nature. This is also true of the child in the early version of the "Ode": although the grave shuts out sense impressions, it is a "place of thought" and thus of human consciousness and identity. Wordsworth's most death-full solitaires, the Old Leech Gatherer and the Soldier in *The Prelude*, for instance, are rich in an almost suprahuman consciousness in proportion as they are deprived of the life of the senses.

Wordsworth's interest in putting the body to sleep in order to become a living soul is well-known. What we need to understand about "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal" is the uncompromising nature of its vision. Lucy is deprived of bodily function without a corresponding increase in spirit or consciousness. *Nor is this increase implicitly transferred*, as it is in most of the other poems on solitaires, to the mind of the speaker. The lover-poet is unique in that he does not derive from his approach to deathfulness a genuinely enhanced conception of the power and mysterious depth of the human mind.

Does this mean that the last two lines of "A Slumber" reflect "inconsolability and bitter irony?" Not at all. Nor do they imply, as has been said, a "vision of unity," "a rightful unification with a beneficent natural world" (Taaffe, "Poet and Lover," 178-9). Both of these interpretations seem to me to be overstated and inattentive to the particularity of the poem's tone. Wordsworth does not embrace the universe in a vision of pantheistic oneness; neither does he "rage against the dying of the light" with the unregenerate irony of a Byronic hero or the uncomprehending bitterness of an *homme moyen sensuel*. As Geoffrey Hartman puts it, "The poem may have its structural irony, but the poet's mood is meditative beyond irony" (*Wordsworth's Poetry*, p. 159).

At the beginning of this essay, I distinguished between the poet and the lover, and I suggested that the lover's voice becomes part of a larger dialectic in the "Lucy" poems. In "A Slumber," we still hear the accents of the lover; we are still aware of the special quality of humanness which he sets against the encroachments of mortality. At the same time, however, and for the first time in any of the poems we have considered, the voice of the bereaved lover is dominated by, although it is by no means lost in, what I would call the voice of the poet. Once again, there has been a slumber and an awakening to the threatening knowledge of human mortality. Now,

however, this knowledge provokes in the speaker a substantially different quality of consciousness and thus a changed poetic voice.

The voice of the poet speaks, as it does at the end of "Michael" and "The Ruined Cottage," of resignation, acceptance, and even awe at the processes of the universe, but an awe which is, while deeply sincere, ultimately joyless. There are two great guiding principles in Wordsworth's experience of life which come into conflict in this poem: the principles of permanence and of pleasure. Everywhere in his poetry and his prose, Wordsworth tends to revere that which is permanent, regular, deeply abiding, whether in nature or in the heart of man. An implicit and essential promise of his early poetic theory, as expressed, for example, in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, is a marriage between this principle of permanence and the power of joy.

Nor let this necessity of producing immediate pleasure be considered as a degradation of the Poet's art. It is far otherwise. It is an acknowledgment of the beauty of the universe, . . . further, it is a homage paid to the native and naked dignity of man, to the grand elementary principle of pleasure, by which he knows, and feels, and lives, and moves.

"A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal" and, to a lesser degree, the other three original "Lucy" poems, are unique because their view of time and nature differs from the characteristic permutations of the concept of permanence in Wordsworth's thought. They do not, on the one hand, ground (pantheistically or otherwise) the "dignity of man" in the teleology or goodness of nature, or in the "grand elementary principle of pleasure." Nor do they assume, on the other, the perspective of "the faith that looks through death" to secure human identity in a post- (or pre-) mortal existence. The tone of resignation in "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal" is not much different from that in "Resolution and Independence" or in the concluding stanzas of the "Intimations Ode," except that it is unrelieved by the hope in Christian providence and spiritual immortality which broods, however unconvincingly, over the later Wordsworth. Perhaps this is one reason, along with the often discussed artistic ones, which made Wordsworth's experiment with the "Lucy" poems a poetic dead-end. The perspectives of the lover or the poet who finds no sufficient remedy for human mortality either in nature or beyond it are perspectives which it would have been impossible for Wordsworth, being Wordsworth, to sustain.

Despite his modernity, and it is considerable; despite his "existential" tendencies, and he does exhibit some; despite his egoism, which is both ample and sublime, Wordsworth's idiosyncratic mode of humanism demands some principle of sustenance beyond the indi-



vidual self. The first four "Lucy" poems question the existence of any such principle, and thus border on a peculiarly modern sense of tragedy which the poet was both unwilling and unable to explore.

#### IV

It is in this context, finally, that I think "I Travelled Among Unknown Men" must be understood. The critical judgment that "in feeling and language it belongs as closely to the other four as though it had been written at the same time" (Moorman, p. 422) seems to me to be untenable. Written in England in 1801, two years after the others, "I Travelled" represents, rather, a new departure; more precisely, it represents an attempt to transmute the nascently tragic perceptions of the first four poems into a new and affirmative form. Most critics have found "I Travelled" to be artistically inferior to the other "Lucy" poems, and one is tempted to read a critical commonplace into this fact: as Wordsworth's views became more conventional, his poetry tended to decline.

However this may be, the poem is a remarkable example of what might be called, in psychoanalytic terms, a type of displacement. The foreignness, the unknown mystery originally surrounding Lucy's life and death, are now given a local habitation across the channel:

I travelled amoung unknown men,  
In lands beyond the sea;  
Nor, England! did I know till then  
What love I bore to thee.

The image of slumber and dream in stanza two (" 'Tis past, the melancholy dream!") no longer refers, as in the previous poems, to a problematical state of human consciousness or unconsciousness. The allusion now is to an historical, although still metaphorically potent, event: Wordsworth's traumatic sojourn in Germany.

Most importantly, the poet-lover's relation to Lucy is dissolved, along with its complex and considerable range of human meaning, in the patriot's love of country. Lucy becomes a sentimentalized and conventionally-conceived talisman in Wordsworth's love song to England ("thy" in the following quatrain refers to England):

Among thy mountains did I feel  
The joy of my desire;  
And she I cherished turned her wheel  
Beside an English fire.

As Crane Brinton has pointed out, Wordsworth's patriotism evolved from severe introspection.<sup>19</sup> It is possible to see the poet's nationalism, which turned gradually into reactionism, as an attempt to domesticate, to traditionalize, and thus somehow to control a power of insight and imagination which he was no longer able to sustain and which he came, therefore, to fear.

In the broadest sense, the "Lucy" poems seem almost to telescope the developmental pattern of Wordsworth's poetic life. They provide an uniquely uncompromised expression of the depth of the gulf which he discovered could exist between man and nature; and, in "I Travelled Among Unknown Men," they afford one of the earliest examples of the way in which he was to seek redemption after such knowledge. While, on the one hand, they are probably the most stylized and highly individualized thing that the poet ever wrote, the ultimate context of the "Lucy" poems is as broad as Wordsworth's poetry itself.

University of Virginia

19. *Political Ideas of the English Romanticists* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926), p. 55.