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## On Edge: The Crossways of Contemporary Criticism

The word “crossways” in my title is meant to suggest borders as well as crossroads. This double image is implicit in the poem by Wordsworth I shall discuss. It is also appropriate to the present state of criticism. Literary study often develops through genetic crossings; it brings together different disciplines or different modes of literary study. I shall attempt now to describe the present moment in literary study. The description will by no means pretend to be a sovereign overview. Any such description is necessarily from within, at the crossroads. This is the case not so much because every view is interested, a biased perspective, as because on principle there is no conceivable metalanguage outside one or another of the languages of criticism.

The institutionalized study of vernacular literature is of course a fairly recent development in the West. Matthew Arnold was in 1857 the first Professor of Poetry at Oxford to give his lectures in English. Although departments of English seem now a necessary part of any college or university—a natural feature of the academic landscape, part of nature, so to speak—until not too many decades ago they did not exist at all. They could of course again easily cease to exist or become marginal, as have, alas, departments of Greek and Latin. Some experts believe that this is in fact happening. A new discipline of rhetoric and the teaching of composition, they say, is developing across the nation. This new discipline will displace the departments of English or relegate them to the status departments of classics presently hold. This would in fact be a return to the situation in late nineteenth-century America, when all colleges and universities had substantial staffs in composition and in rhetoric. The discipline of the study of vernacular literature was just establishing itself. Thus the presence in American universities of large and strong departments of literary history

and literary criticism may be a relatively short-lived phenomenon, lasting less than a century. The alternative would be for them to make changes which would allow them to survive in a new cultural situation.

Changes in literary study, however, as in other disciplines, usually take place with glacial slowness. Such study is strongly institutionalized in secondary school curricula; in college and university departments of English, French, German, comparative literature, and so on; in textbooks and editions; in curricula inscribed in catalogues as though fixed for the ages; and in graduate programs turning out new Ph.D.'s, far too many of them for the available positions. These new Ph.D.'s tend to be trained to teach only literature and to teach it only in certain ways; their training in the teaching of composition is often minimal. The greatest institutionalized resistance to change is in the more or less fixed presuppositions, prejudices, and feelings of those who teach literature and write about it.

This institutional continuity in the study of literature of course has great advantages. It would be impossible for each teacher to make up the whole discipline anew each time he confronted a text or a class. Even the most innovative scholar, teacher, or critic depends on the presence of a relatively stable and conservative academic organization in order to get on with his own work. Much time these days is in fact wasted in the humanities on the endless concoction of new courses and new curricula. There are problems, however, if the institution no longer responds fully to the demands made on it by society, in one direction, nor fits the actual state of the discipline involved, in the other, which, I believe, is to a considerable degree the case at present. Nevertheless, in spite of the inertia of its institutional embodiments, the study of literature in America is at this moment changing with unusual rapidity.

One change is being imposed from outside the discipline, from the direction of society. By society here I mean the context within which literary study in America dwells, which it serves

and is served by: parents, school boards, trustees, regents, legislatures, the "media." We teachers of literature have fewer students already and will apparently have still fewer as the years go by, both in individual courses and as majors in the various departments of literature. Those fewer are steadily less well prepared, both in literature itself and in what are called "basic language skills." They cannot write well. They cannot read well either. The reading of works of literature appears to be playing every day a less and less important role in our culture generally. The complex social function performed in Elizabethan and Jacobean England by going to the theater and in Victorian England by the reading of novels is performed these days by other activities, mostly, so it seems, by watching television. The reading of a novel, poem, or play, or even the watching of a play, is likely to become an increasingly artificial, marginal, or archaic activity. It is beginning to seem more and more odd, to some people, to be asked to take seriously the literature of a small island on the edge of Europe, a small island, moreover, which has ceased to be a major world power. It might be more important to learn Russian or Chinese or Arabic. At the same time, American society has begun to recognize that we are to a considerable degree a multilingual people, not only because many of us have Spanish or some other tongue as a first language, but because we speak and write many different forms of English besides the idiolect and grapholect of standard English. For better or worse, much "standard English as a second language" must be taught, even to college students.

As College Board scores go down from year to year, our society is demanding in a louder and louder chorus that schools and colleges do something soon about the fact that our young people cannot read and cannot write. This demand, at the college and university level, is being made on professors who have been trained to teach the details of literary history and the intricacies of meaning in works by Shakespeare

or Milton, Keats or Woolf. Even before they found themselves asked to teach more and more composition, many departments of English had been demoralized by declining enrollments and had begun to set their Shakespearians and medievalists to teach classes in modern fiction, in film, or in continental novels in translation, just as the department of classics in one large state university justifies its existence at the undergraduate level by a lecture course on "mythology." A large proportion of the courses offered by the department of English in one good liberal arts college I visited recently included at least one work by J. L. Borges. This department is for all practical purposes a department of continental literature in translation, and the departments of Spanish, French, and German at the same college are small and ineffective.

In the area of expository writing a large industry is being mobilized to create a new discipline. This mobilization includes distinguished literary theorists and historians like E. D. Hirsch, Wayne Booth, and Stanley Fish, who began as literary critics, not as experts on the teaching of composition. At the same time, more and more bright young people are already making careers in composition, seeking training in rhetoric, in linguistics, and in educational psychology rather than narrowly in traditional literary history and criticism. This is all to the good, but it will obviously weaken further the traditional activities of the study of literature as such.

At the same time, from the other direction, there have been unusually rapid changes within the discipline of literary study proper. Thirty years ago the field of literary study in America was more or less completely dominated by the method of intrinsic reading called the "New Criticism" and by a positivistic literary history committed to gathering facts and establishing texts. The latter mode was associated with the method of scientific research. It descended from such nineteenth-century metaphorical assimilations of literary study to scientific method as that of Hyppolite

Taine, as well as from the long European tradition of philology and textual criticism originally coming from the study of Greek and Latin literature and from Biblical hermeneutics. The archetypal criticism of Northrop Frye was in 1948 just appearing as the first strong alternative to the New Criticism. There was a somewhat marginal presence of the great German philological tradition in the form of refugee scholars like Erich Auerbach and Leo Spitzer. Some news of continental formalism—Russian, Czech, and Polish—was seeping through in the influential book by Rene Wellek and Austin Warren called *The Theory of Literature*. In spite of the latter book, however, literary study in America was still insular. It was a more or less self-enclosed Anglo-American tradition confident that it could go on going it alone.

Today the situation is greatly changed. No serious student of literature can fail to think of it as an international enterprise. It is just as important for the student of Chaucer, of Shakespeare, or of Dickens to know about continental criticism and to read such an international journal as *PTL*, which is edited at the Institute for Poetics and Semiotics in Tel Aviv, as it is for him to know the tradition of secondary works on these authors in English or to read *The Publications of the Modern Language Association*.

Moreover, the range of viable alternatives in literary methodology has become bafflingly large. These alternatives can, so it seems, hardly be reconciled in some grand synthesis. *Il faut choisir*. Along with the still powerful New Criticism, archetypal criticism, and positivistic literary history, there is a more or less fully elaborated phenomenological or hermeneutic criticism, a “criticism of consciousness” as it is sometimes called. A new semiotic formalism inspired by linguistics has been developed. There is a structuralist criticism deriving from structural linguistics and structural anthropology. A powerful new form of psychoanalytic criticism, mostly imported from France, has become influential. A revived Marxist and

sociological criticism is beginning to take strong hold in America. Another new kind of criticism focuses on reader response and on what is called in Germany *Rezeptionsgeschichte*. There is, finally, a form of literary study which concentrates on the rhetoric of literary texts, taking rhetoric in the sense of the investigation of the role of figurative language in literature. This method is sometimes called "deconstruction," which as a name at least has the advantage of distinguishing it firmly from any form of "structuralism." It is associated with the name of Jacques Derrida in France and with certain critics at my own university, Yale, as well as, increasingly, with younger critics at other universities in the United States. It has distinguished native grandsires or at least great-uncles in Kenneth Burke and William Empson. All these new forms are international in scope. The master works in each are as likely to have been written in Russian, German, French, or Italian as in English. This means that the delays and inadequacies of translation have made particular difficulties for literary study recently in America. Few students and young teachers here can read even one foreign language fluently, much less the whole necessary panoply.

This is not the place to attempt a description of each of these modes. It takes a whole semester of an elaborately team-taught course at my university to provide even a relatively superficial introduction to them for undergraduates. My aim here is to suggest that literary study in America now is in an unusually fluid or unstable condition. It is likely to change much more rapidly than usual, as much from forces within itself as from the pressures from without sketched earlier. This makes it somewhat unpredictable; only a remarkably insensitive or secluded person would be complacently at ease. It is in fact an exciting field to work in at the moment, though it is also no wonder so many members of my profession feel on edge, edgy.

In spite of the bewildering array of possibilities in literary methodology, the methods

available may, for the purposes to which I want to turn now, be reduced to two distinctly different sorts. One kind includes all those methods whose presuppositions are in one way or another what I would call "metaphysical." The other kind includes those methods which hypothesize that in literature, for reasons which are intrinsic to language itself, metaphysical presuppositions are, necessarily, both affirmed and subverted. By "metaphysical" I mean the system of assumptions coming down from Plato and Aristotle which has unified our culture. This system includes the notions of beginning, continuity, and end, of causality, of dialectical process, of organic unity, and of ground, in short of *logos* in all its many senses. A metaphysical method of literary study assumes that literature is in one way or another referential, in one way or another grounded in something outside language. This something may be physical objects, or "society," or the economic realities of labor, valuation, and exchange. It may be consciousness, the *cogito*, or the unconscious, or absolute spirit, or God. An anti-metaphysical or "deconstructive" form of literary study attempts to show that in a given work of literature, in a different way in each case, metaphysical assumptions are both present and at the same time undermined by the text itself. They are undermined by some figurative play within the text which forbids it to be read as an "organic unity" organized around some version of the *logos*. The play of tropes leaves an inassimilable residue or remnant of meaning, an unearned increment, so to speak, making a movement of sense beyond any unifying boundaries. The following out of the implications of the play of tropes leads to a suspension of fully rationalizable meaning in the experience of an *aporia* or boggling of the mind. This boggling sets up an oscillation in meaning. Dialectical opposites capable of synthesis may break down into the contradictory elements which are differences among the same.

This distinction between two kinds of criticism must not be understood, as it sometimes



is, to be an historical one, or rather, it challenges a certain historical patterning. What I have been saying must be understood as putting in question the familiar historical scheme which presupposes that there was once an age of faith or of metaphysics which was followed by the skepticism, disintegration, or fragmentation of modern times. The argument, rather, is that the literary and philosophical texts of any period of Western culture contain, in a different way each time, both what I am calling metaphysics and the putting in question of metaphysics. The test of this hypothesis is the interpretation of the texts themselves. It is here that the battle should be fought. What does this given poem or passage *mean*? In principle, and in fact, a Greek tragedy, an episode in Ovid, in Dante, or in *The Faerie Queene* would be as good a testing ground for this as any Romantic or Post-Romantic poem, though I have chosen a well-known text from English Romanticism as my example.

The relation of metaphysics and the deconstruction of metaphysics finds a parable in the strange relation of kinship among apparent opposites in Wordsworth's "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal." Here is the poem:

A slumber did my spirit seal:  
I had no human fears:  
She seemed a thing that could not feel  
The touch of earthly years.

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.

This beautiful, moving, and apparently simple poem was written at Goslar in Germany in the late fall or early winter of 1798-1799, during Wordsworth's miserable sojourn there with his sister Dorothy. It seems at first to be organized around a systematically interrelated set of binary oppositions. These seem to be genuinely exclusive oppositions, with a distinct uncrossable boundary line between them. Such a systematic set of oppositions, as always, in-

vites interpretation of the dialectical sort. In such an interpretation, the oppositions are related in some scheme of hierarchical subordination. This makes possible a synthesis grounded in an explanatory third term constituting the *logos* of the poem. This *logos* is the poem's source and end, its ground and meaning, its "word" or "message." This particular text, I am arguing, forbids the successful completion of such a procedure. The method does not work. Something is always left over, a plus value beyond the boundaries of each such interpretation.

A surprising number of oppositions are present in the poem. These include slumber as against waking; male as against female; sealed up as against open; seeming as against being; ignorance as against knowledge; past as against present; inside as against outside; light as against darkness in the "diurnal" course of the earth; subject or consciousness, "spirit," as against object, the natural world of stones and trees; feeling as "touch" as against feeling as emotion, "fears"; "human fears" as against—what?—perhaps inhuman fears; "thing" in its meaning of "girl," young virgin, as against "thing" in the sense of physical object; years as against days; hearing as against seeing; motion as against force; self-propulsion as against exterior compulsion; mother as against daughter or sister, or perhaps any female family member as against some woman from outside the family, that is, mother, sister, or daughter as against mistress or wife, in short, incestuous desires against legitimate sexual feelings; life as against death.

The invitation to interpret the poem in terms of oppositions is sustained in part by its syntactical and formal structure. Syntactically it is structured around words or phrases in apposition or opposition. The second line, for instance, repeats the first, and then lines three and four say it over again:

A slumber did my spirit seal;  
I had no human fears:  
She seemed a thing that could not feel  
The touch of earthly years.

To have no human fears is the same thing as to have a sealed spirit. Both of these are defined by the speaker's false assumption that Lucy will not grow old or die. Formally the poem is organized by the opposition between the first stanza and the second. Each stanza sets one line against the next, the first two against the last two; each also sets line one against line three and line two against line four, by way of the interlaced pattern of rhymes—*abab, cdcd*. The bar or barrier or blank on the page between the two stanzas constitutes the major formal structuring principle of the poem. In the shift from past to present tense this bar opposes then to now, ignorance to knowledge, life to death. The speaker has moved across the line from innocence to knowledge through the experience of Lucy's death. The poem expresses both eloquently restrained grief for that death and the calm of mature knowledge. Before, he was innocent. His spirit was sealed from knowledge as though he were asleep, closed in on himself. His innocence took the form of an ignorance of the fact of death. Lucy seemed so much alive, such an invulnerable vital young thing, that she could not possibly be touched by time, reach old age, and die. Her seeming immortality reassured the speaker of his own, and so he did not anticipate with fear his own death. He had no human fears. To be human is to be mortal, and the most specifically human fear, it may be, is the fear of death.

Wordsworth, in fact, as we know from other texts both in poetry and in prose, had as a child, and even as a young man, a strong conviction of his immortality. The feeling that it would be impossible for him to die was associated with a strong sense of participation in a nature both enduringly material, therefore immortal, and at the same time enduringly spiritual, therefore also immortal, though in a different way. In this poem, as in so many others by Wordsworth—"The Boy of Winander," the Matthew poems, and "The Ruined Cottage," for example—the speaker confronts the fact of his own death by confronting the death of another. He speaks as a survivor standing by a

grave, a corpse, or a headstone, and his poem takes the form of an epitaph.

The second stanza of "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal" speaks in the perpetual "now" of a universal knowledge of death. The speaker knows his own death through the death of another. Then Lucy seemed an invulnerable young "thing;" now she is truly a thing, closed in on herself like a stone. She is a corpse, without senses or consciousness, unable to feel any touch, unable to move of her own free will, but unwillingly and unwittingly moved by the daily rotation of the earth.

The structure of the poem is temporal. It is also "allegorical" in the technical sense in which that term is used by Walter Benjamin or by Paul de Man. The meaning of the poem arises from the interaction of two emblematic times. These are juxtaposed across an intervening gap. They are related not by similarity but by radical difference. The ironic clash between the two senses of "thing" is a miniature version of the total temporal allegory which constitutes the poem.

The play on the word "thing" exists, it happens, also in German. Two curious passages in Martin Heidegger's work will perhaps help to understand it better in Wordsworth. The first is in a passage in "*Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes*" ("The Origin of the Work of Art"), in which Heidegger is giving examples of times when we do or do not call something a "thing":

A man is not a thing. (*Der Mensch ist kein Ding.*) It is true that we speak of a young girl who is faced with a task too difficult for her (*eine ubermassige Aufgabe*) as being a young thing, still too young for it (*eine noch zu junges Ding*), but only because we feel that being human is in a certain way missing here (*hier das Menschsein in gewisser Weise vermissen*) and think that instead we have to do here with the factor that constitutes the thingly character of things (*das Dinghafte der Dinge*). We hesitate even to call the deer in the forest clearing, the beetle in the grass, the blade of grass a thing. We could sooner think of a hammer as a thing, or a shoe, or an ax, or a clock. But even these are not mere things

*(Aber ein blosses Ding sind auch sie nicht).*  
Only a stone, a clod of earth, a piece of wood  
are for us such mere things.

Strangely, though perhaps in response to a deep necessity, Heidegger gives almost exactly the same list of mere things as Wordsworth. His young girl, stone, clod of earth, piece of wood, correspond to Wordsworth's Lucy, rocks, stones, trees, and the earth itself. Moreover, Heidegger, certainly not known for his attention to the sexual aspect of things, finds himself of necessity, in his account of the uses of the word "thing," introducing the fact of sexual difference. A young girl is a thing because something is missing in her which men have. "A man is not a thing." This something missing makes her "too young for it," too young for the burdens of life. She is too innocent, too light.

This lightness of the maiden thing, which makes a young girl both beneath adult male knowledge and lightheartedly above it, appears in another odd passage in Heidegger, in this case in *Die Frage nach dem Ding (What is a Thing?)*. Heidegger first recalls the story in Plato's *Thaetetus* about the "goodlooking and whimsical maid from Thrace" who laughed at Thales when he fell down a well while occupied in studying the heavens. In his study of all things in the universe, "the things in front of his very nose and feet were unseen by him." "Therefore," says Heidegger in commentary on Plato's story, "the question 'What is a thing?' must always be rated as one which causes housemaids to laugh. And genuine housemaids must have something to laugh about (*Und was eine rechte Dienstmagd ist, muss doch auch etwas zum lachen haben*)." The question, "What is a thing?", which is the question implicit in "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal," would be a laughable non-question to Lucy. She would not understand it because she *is* a thing. Being a thing makes her both immeasurably below and immeasurably above laughable man with his eternal questions. By dying Lucy moves from the below to the above, leaving the male

poet in either case in between, excluded, unable to break the seal.

As the reader works his or her way into the poem, attempting to break its seal, however, it comes to seem odder than the account of it I have so far given. My account has been a little too logical, a little too much like Thales' account of the universe, an analogical oversimplification. For one thing, the speaker has in fact not died. Lucy, it may be, has achieved immortality by joining herself to the perpetual substance of earth, which cannot die, as Wordsworth very forcefully says at the beginning of Book V of *The Prelude*. The speaker by not dying remains excluded from that perpetual vitality. His immortality is the bad one of a permanent empty knowledge of death and a permanent impossibility of dying. The "I" of the first stanza ("I had no human fears") has disappeared entirely in the impersonal assertions of the second stanza. It is as though the speaker had lost his selfhood by waking to knowledge. He has become an anonymous impersonal wakefulness, perpetually aware that Lucy is dead and that he is not yet dead. This is the position of the survivor in all Wordsworth's work.

Moreover, an obscure sexual drama is enacted in this poem. This drama is a major carrier of its allegorical significance. The identification of this drama will take the reader further inside. As we know from *The Prelude* as well as from the Lucy poems, nature for Wordsworth was strongly personified. It was, oddly, personified as both male and female, as both father and mother. The earth was the maternal face and body he celebrates in the famous "Infant Babe" passage in the earliest version of *The Prelude*, written also in Goslar in 1798:

No outcast he, bewilder'd and depress'd;  
Along his infant veins are interfus'd  
The gravitation and the filial bond  
Of nature, that connect him with the world.

Nature was also, however, in certain other episodes of the earliest *Prelude*, a frightening

male spirit threatening to punish the poet for wrongdoing. The poem "Nutting," also written at Goslar and later incorporated into *The Prelude*, brings the two sexes of nature together in the astonishing scene of a rape of female nature which brings the terror of a reprisal from another aspect of nature, a fearsome male guardian capable of revenge.

Wordsworth's mother died when he was eight, his father when he was thirteen. His father's death and Wordsworth's irrational sense of guilt for it are the subject of another episode of the two-book *Prelude*, another of the "spots of time." His mother's death, however, is curiously elided, so that the reader might not even be sure what the poet is talking about:

For now a trouble came into my mind  
From obscure causes. I was left alone . . .

The death of Wordsworth's mother hardly seems an "obscure cause" for sorrow, and yet the poet wants to efface that death. He wants to push the source of the sorrow of solitude further back, into deeper obscurity. In the Lucy poems the possession of Lucy alive and seemingly immortal is a replacement for the lost mother. It gives him again that direct filial bond to nature he had lost with the mother's death. It perhaps does not matter greatly whether the reader thinks of Lucy as a daughter or as a mistress or as an embodiment of his feelings for his sister Dorothy. What matters is the way in which her imagined death is a re-enactment of the death of the mother as described in *The Prelude*.

The re-enactment of the death of the mother takes a peculiar form in "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal," however. This poem, and the Lucy poems as a group, can be defined as an attempt to have it both ways, an attempt which, necessarily, fails. Within his writing, which is what is meant here by "Wordsworth," the poet's abandonment has always already occurred. It is the condition of life and poetry once Wordsworth has been left alone, once he has become an outcast, bewildered and de-

pressed. His only hope for re-establishing the bond that connected him to the world is to die without dying, to be dead, in his grave, and yet still alive, bound to maternal nature by way of a surrogate mother, a girl who remains herself both alive and dead, still available in life and yet already taken by Nature. Of course this is impossible, but it is out of such impossibilities that great poems are made.

Wordsworth's acting out of this fantasy is described in an extraordinary passage by Dorothy Wordsworth. This is her entry in the "Grasmere Journals" for April 29, 1802, three and a half years after the composition of "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal":

We then went to John's Grove, sate a while at first. Afterwards William lay, and I lay in the trench under the fence—he with his eyes shut and listening to the waterfalls and the Birds. There was no one waterfall—it was the sound of waters in the air—the voice of the air. William heard me breathing and rustling now and then but we both lay still, and unseen by one another. He thought that it would be as sweet thus to lie so in the grave, to hear the *peaceful* sounds of the earth and just to know that our dear friends were near.

"A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal" dramatizes the impossibility of fulfilling this fantasy, or rather it demonstrates that it can only be fulfilled in fantasy, that is, in a structure of words in which "thing" can mean both "person" and "object," in which one can have both stanzas at once, and can, like Lucy, be both alive and dead, or in which the poet can be both the dead-alive girl and at the same time the perpetually wakeful survivor. To have it as word-play, however, is to have it as the impossibility of having it, to have it as permanent loss and separation, to have it as the unbridgeable gap between one meaning of the word "thing" and the other.

In "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal" this simultaneous winning and losing, winning by losing, losing by winning, is expressed in a constant slipping of entities across borders into their opposites. As a result the mind cannot



carry on that orderly thinking which depends on keeping "things" firmly fixed in their conceptual pigeon-holes. Lucy was a virgin "thing." She seemed untouchable by earthly years, that is, untouchable by nature as time, as the bringer of death, as death. The touch of earthly years is both a form of sexual appropriation which leaves the one who is possessed still virgin if she dies young, and at the same time it is the ultimate dispossession which is death. To be touched by earthly years is a way to be sexually penetrated while still remaining virgin.

The speaker of the poem rather than being the opposite of Lucy, male to her female, adult knowledge to her prepubertal innocence, is the displaced representative of both the penetrated and the penetrator, of both Lucy herself and of her unravishing ravisher, nature or death. The speaker was "sealed," as she was. Now he knows. He is unsealed, as she is. To know, however, as the second stanza indicates, is to speak from the impersonal position of death. It is to speak as death. Death is the penetrator who leaves his victim intact, unpierced, but at the same time wholly open, as an unburied corpse is exposed, open to the sky, like rocks and stones and trees. The speaker's movement to knowledge, as his consciousness becomes dispersed, loses its "I," is "the same thing" as Lucy's death. It finds its parable in that death.

Whatever track the reader follows through the poem he arrives at blank contradictions. These contradictions are not ironic. They are the copresence of difference within the same, as, for example, time in the poem is not different from space but is collapsed into the rolling motion of the earth, or as Lucy in her relation to the speaker blurs the difference of the sexes. Lucy is both the virgin child and the missing mother, that mother earth who gave birth to the speaker and has abandoned him. Male and female, however, come together in the earth, and so Lucy and the speaker are "the same," though the poet is also the perpetually excluded difference from Lucy, an unneeded increment, like an abandoned child. The two

women, mother and girl child, have jumped over the male generation in the middle. They have erased its power of mastery, its power of logical understanding, which is the male power *par excellence*. In expressing this, the poem leaves its reader with no possibility of moving through or beyond or standing outside in sovereign control. The reader is caught in an unstillable oscillation unsatisfying to the mind and incapable of being grounded in anything outside the activity of the poem itself.

“A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal” shimmers between affirming male mastery as the consciousness which survives the death of the two generations, mother and daughter or sister, and *knows*, and lamenting the failure of consciousness to join itself to the dead mother, and therefore to the ground of consciousness, by way of its possession of the sister or daughter. On the one hand, he does survive; if he does not have possession or power, he has knowledge. On the other hand, thought or knowledge is not guiltless. The poet has himself somehow caused Lucy’s death by thinking about it. Thinking recapitulates in reverse mirror image the action of the earthly years in touching, penetrating, possessing, killing, encompassing, turning the other into oneself and therefore being left only with a corpse, an empty sign.

Lest it be supposed that I am grounding my reading of the poem on the “psychobiographical” details of the poet’s reaction to the death of his parents, let me say that it is the other way around. Wordsworth interpreted the death of his mother according to the traditional trope identifying the earth with a maternal presence. By the time we encounter her in his writing she exists as an element in that figure. His life, like his poetry, was the working out of the consequences of this fictitious trope, or rather of the whole figurative system into which it is incorporated. This incorporation exists both in Wordsworth’s language and in the Western tradition generally, both before and after him. To put this as economically as possible, “A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal,” in the context of

the other Lucy poems and of all Wordsworth's work, enacts one version of a constantly repeated Occidental drama of the lost sun. Lucy's name of course means light. To possess her would be a means of rejoining the lost source of light, the father sun as *logos*, as head power and fount of meaning. As light she is the vacant evidence that that capital source seems once to have existed. Light is dispersed everywhere but yet may not be captured or held. It is like those heavens Thales studied. To seek to catch or understand it is to be in danger of falling in a well. The fear of the death of Lucy is the fear that the light will fail, that all links with the sun will be lost, as, in "Strange Fits of Passion," another of the Lucy poems, the setting of the moon, mediated female image of the sun, makes the poet-lover fear Lucy's death:

"Oh mercy!" to myself I cried,  
"If Lucy should be dead."

The fulfillment of that fear in her actual death is the loss both of light and of the source of light. It is the loss of the *logos*, leaving the poet and his words groundless. The loss of Lucy is the loss of the poet's female reflex or Narcissistic mirror image. In the absence of the filial bond to nature, this has been the only source of his solid sense of selfhood. In one version of the Narcissis story, Narcissis' self-love is generated by the hopeless search for a beloved twin sister, who has died. For Wordsworth, "The furiously burning father fire" (Wallace Stevens' phrase) has sunk beneath the horizon, apparently never to return. In spite of the diurnal rotation of the earth that earth seems to have absorbed all the light. Even the moon, reflected and mediated source of sunlight at night, and so the emblem of Lucy, has set. The consciousness of the poet has survived all these deaths of the light to subsist as a kind of black light. His awareness is the light-no-light which remains when the sun has sunk and Lucy has died, when both have gone into the earth.

This loss of the radiance of the *logos*, along with the experience of the consequences of that

loss, is the drama of all Wordsworth's poetry, in particular "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal." In the absence of any firm grounding the poem necessarily takes on a structure of chiasmus. This is the perpetual reversal of properties in crisscross substitutions I have tried to identify. The senses of the poem continually cross over the borders set up by the words if they are taken to refer to fixed "things," whether material or subjective. The words waver in their meaning. Each word in itself becomes the dwelling place of contradictory senses, as though host and parasite were together in the same house. This wavering exceeds the bounds of the distinction between literal and figurative language, since literal ground and figurative derivative change places too within the word, just as do the other opposites. This wavering within the word is matched by an analogous wavering in the syntax. That in turn is matched by the large-scale relation of going and coming between the two stanzas. Each of these waverings is another example of the disparate in the matching pair which forbids any dialectical synthesis. The tracing out of these differences within the same moves the attention away from the attempt to ground the poem in anything outside itself. It catches the reader within a movement in the text without any solid foundation in consciousness, in nature, or in spirit. As groundless, the movement is, precisely, alogical.

This explanation of Wordsworth's little poem has led me seemingly far away from a sober description of the state of contemporary literary study. It is meant, however, to "exemplify" one mode of such interpretation. In a passage in *The Will to Power* Nietzsche says: "To be able to read off a text as a text without interposing an interpretation is the last-developed form of 'inner experience'—perhaps one that is hardly possible." If it is hardly possible, it may not even be desirable, since interpretation, as Nietzsche also elsewhere says, is an active, affirmative process, a taking possession of something for some purpose or use. In the multitudinous forms of this which make up

the scene of literary study, perhaps the true fork in the road is between two modes of this taking possession, two modes of teaching literature and writing about it. One mode already knows what it is going to find. Such a mode is controlled by the presupposition of some center. The other alternative mode of reading is more open to the inexhaustible strangeness of literary texts. This enigmatic strangeness much literary study busily covers over. The strangeness of literature remains, however. It survives all attempts to hide it. It is one of the major correlatives of the human predicament, since our predicament is to remain, always, within language. The strangeness lies in the fact that language, our Western languages at least, both affirm logic and at the same time turn it on edge, as happens in "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal." If this is the case, the alternative mode of literary study I have tried to exemplify both can and should be incorporated into college and university curricula. This is already happening to some extent, but, as I see it, the development of programs for this, from basic courses in reading and writing up to the most advanced graduate seminars, is one task in humanistic studies today.

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