Sebastian Domsch, Christoph Reinfandt,
Katharina Rennhak (Eds.)

Romantic Ambiguities

Abodes of the Modern

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Mark J. Bruhn

Ambiguity in Affect: The Modernity of Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads*

for Christoph, and occasionally in his manner

Bode's Aesthetics of Ambiguity: A Brief Review

In everyday discourse, *disambiguation* is the name of the game. Verbal tokens of underdetermined linguistic types are offered in specific referential contexts that, for most intents and purposes, severely restrict the range of possible meanings of the resulting utterance. Indeed, when the effort is felicitous, the range of possible meanings for most everyday utterances (apart from irony, jokes and puns, political doublespeak, and other devices of wit) is normally restricted to a wholly unambiguous *one*. "I will see you here tomorrow"[1] is perfectly transparent in everyday usage, where both parties, thanks to the referential context of face-to-face conversation, easily assign one and the same specific meaning to tokens of general types – *I*, *you*, *here*, *tomorrow* – that in another spatio-temporal context with other speakers would index quite different specific meanings.

In literary discourse, by contrast, *ambiguation* is the name of the game, in the first place because tokens of general types are offered outside of any specific referential context beyond the one constituted by the tokens themselves. Imagine a text that begins, without quotation marks, *I will see you here tomorrow*. At this opening stage of the literary game, those same general types that in most everyday usage would be instantly restricted to a single determinate meaning are left (for the moment at least) radically undetermined, open to any and conceivably even to multiple determination by the ensuing text, which will presumably unfold the as-yet-non-existent "referential situation" from which these dislocated words have paradoxically (impossibly!) floated free. At the same time that they are radically open, however, in any actual reading these decontextualized words would be haunted by their habitual significations in the realm of everyday discourse from which they hail, where *I* infallibly designates the speaker/author of an utterance, *you* its addressee, *here* the place where the speaker is now at, and *tomorrow* the day after the day on which he or she speaks. For each individual reader, in other words, these as-yet-undetermined terms would be strangely shadowed by their usual personal determinations, which would suggest themselves as logical possibilities to close signifying gaps that would nevertheless remain open to

1 A sentence often used in introductions to linguistics or literary theory to explain the term 'deictics'; see, e.g., Culler 32-33.

other determination by the discourse that follows. In my case, this imagined opening sentence would accordingly be haunted but in no way semantically foreclosed by the following ascriptions: *I* (the specific author of the utterance, in this case, Mark Bruhn) will see *you* (the reader of the utterance, again Mark Bruhn) *here* (in my living room in Colorado, where from my point of view this imagined discourse encounter is taking place) *tomorrow* (Sunday, September 11, 2016, the day after today when this imagined discourse encounter is taking place).[2] The common, highly determinate ascriptions that obtain in the everyday frame *in which* the reading takes place shadow the uncommon, highly indeterminate openness that obtains in the literary frame *upon and through which* the reading takes place. If this pseudo-literary example doesn't quite work for you, try a "real" one instead. "Call me Ishmael," writes the narrator of *Moby Dick*, who is thus both Melville (an actual writer-speaker assuming a persona in an everyday frame) and not Melville (a fabricated participant-narrator in a literary frame), addressing someone who is both really there (you, an actual reader in the everyday frame) and not really there (the imagined person or persons for whom the fabricated "Ishmael" writes within the literary frame). Anyone holding out hope that this constitutive ambiguity in *Moby Dick* can be dispelled by further reading and critical discrimination need only consult the scholarship on the novel to be overwhelmingly persuaded otherwise. This constitutive ambiguity belongs ineradicably to *Moby Dick*, as it does to the whole discourse domain of literature in which Melville's novel takes its more-than-usually-productive semiotic bearings.[3]

In "The Aesthetics of Ambiguity", Christoph Bode dubs this constitutively literary variety of ambiguity "Ambiguity Mark I," which he defines in terms of the simple but powerful contrast between everyday *referentiality* and literary *auto-referentiality*. Where everyday referentiality serves to disambiguate or restrict meaning, literary auto-referentiality serves to (re)ambiguate or proliferate meaning. A literary text is necessarily auto-referential for the domain-pervading reason already adduced: the primary context to which the words of a literary text refer is the one they create for themselves on and through the very pages that contain them (aka "the co-text"). Now, while Ambiguity Mark I is characteristic of literature qua literature, a literary text needn't be otherwise ambiguous. For while the *primary* context to which a literary utterance refers is the co-textual one it creates through its own making, nevertheless that utterance stands in further (and, again, therefore ambiguating) relation to the contexts of everyday usage in which such utterances (i.e., such words, phrases, sentence types, rhetorical schemes, etc.) normally function, including the all-important "contexts" of grammar, habitual patterns of semantic inference (i.e., conceptual "frames" and "scripts"), and previous experience with literature, or literary "know-how." Another way to put the point (Bode does) is to say that, apart from its constitutive and ineradicable ambiguity, Ambiguity Mark I, a literary text may otherwise closely conform to all other

2 Postscript: it turned out to be true – I *did* meet myself there that next day.

3 For further illustration of the point, see chapter 99 of *Moby Dick*, "The Doubloon."

conventional codes of thought and expression – or not, to varying degrees. To the extent that a literary text satisfies pre-existing expressive and conceptual conventions, it may *appear* to refer as non-literary utterances do, that is, beyond itself and to the shared experiential world at large. It thereby achieves the effect known as *mimesis*, imitation of reality, which tends to conceal the constitutive ambiguity, Ambiguity Mark I, in which literary discourse necessarily takes its origin. Conversely, the more a literary text departs from these normative codes of grammatical and conceptual order, that is, the more it violates the extra-literary expectations that routinely operate, for the most part unreflectively, in the shared experiential world at large, the less the text seems to refer to the shared world of quotidian meaning and the more it appears to self-constitute the alternative order or orders of meaning to which it refers. As literature moves in this *explicitly* auto-referential direction, its constitutive ambiguity is raised to another power (or powers, if multiple codes of thought and expression are being explicitly challenged): Ambiguity Mark II.

With Ambiguity Mark II, literature takes full and knowing advantage of the auto-referential opportunities afforded by its foundational move, Ambiguity Mark I. Ambiguity Mark I challenges everyday referentiality but not yet and not necessarily the codes of linguistic behavior and conceptual belief that make such referentiality possible. That further and still more provocative challenge defines the emergent business of Ambiguity Mark II. Importantly, as literature moves further along the asymptotic cline leading from Ambiguity Mark I to Ambiguity Mark II, it develops historically, becoming increasingly "sophisticated" or "modern" and culminating at last in literary *modernism*, in which all "pre-established codes of decision" (Wordsworth, "Advertisement" to *Lyrical Ballads*, 1798[4]) are methodically and even gleefully (in so-called "post-modernism") upset. As Bode puts it (with characteristic clarity and exuberance), for the full-blooded modernist,

> the breaking of all primary codes is essential. And that includes not only basic codes like the semantic, syntactic, and sometimes even the phonological codes, but also sets of rules of understanding which apply to larger units of a text and produce, when working, conceptions of "character", "time", "place", "plot", "causality", "coherence", etc. All these conventions are in fact semiosis-restricting devices which play a vital role in all kinds of literature which are in the widest sense **mimetic**, most notably, of course, in realistic and naturalistic writing. As I have amply illustrated elsewhere[5] the prehistory of modernism is basically little more than the gradual erosion of textual codes which make the reader believe the text but mirrors life . . . (77; emphasis in the original).

While under this view Romanticism must qualify as part of "the prehistory of modernism," Bode's work at large reveals how richly and variously Romantic writing *earns* that designation; saying so "is not just an anachronistic retrojection from our [later]

4 Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from Wordsworth's poetry and prose are from Wordsworth and Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*.

5 Especially in the full-length *Ästhetik der Ambiguität*.

point of view" (Bode, "By Way of Introduction" 14).[6] As Bode proceeds to argue even here ("The Aesthetics" 78), this "gradual erosion" of primary codes begins and advances in the field of poetry before it overtakes the mimetic strongholds of prose fiction, and it does so at first in small and targeted increments, tackling inherited structures of thought and speech one at a time rather than all at once, and thereby slowly cultivating over the course of the long nineteenth century (1789-1914) the taste by which such radically destabilizing forms of art might be enjoyed.

A critical question then arises concerning the order in which the multiple-code-breaking powers of Ambiguity Mark II were developed and consolidated through this arc of historical time. Considering the many everyday codes that militate against semiotic instability and productivity, on which particular ground or grounds did literary artists first stake an *explicit* claim for the taking of auto-referential liberties? Though "the real language of men," as Coleridge critically observed, could hardly be the battle standard of such a poetic revolution – it was precisely the unambiguous restrictions of everyday thought and discourse that were, increasingly, at issue – Wordsworth perceived that "the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes" might nevertheless be manipulated so as to pitch the battle for semiotic openness on the shared ground where, practically speaking, it had first to be won: the ground of his readers' *affections* (Wordsworth and Coleridge 47, 171). Wordsworth may thus take no small measure of credit (whether he might wish to or no is another matter) for helping to launch the auto-referential revolution in European and American poetics. Though Wordsworth neither made nor anticipated the direct assault upon everyday grammatical expectations and conceptual procedures for which his modernist successors would become notorious, he pointed the way to such practices by exposing and exploiting vulnerabilities in other conventional codes of decision, which can be defined in literary or generic terms in the first place but which ultimately index what Wordsworth calls the social "modes of sentiment" that predetermine our everyday affective relationships to others (Wordsworth 296). Wordsworth targets these affectively-charged conven-

6 In context, Bode advances this important argument with respect to John Keats's "This living hand, now warm and capable," an uncannily auto-referential poetic fragment that forms the centerpiece of another important discussion of literary ambiguity: see Bahti, *passim*. Interestingly, though it was written in 1819, perhaps as a sketch of dramatic dialogue for "The Cap and Bells" or "The Jealousies," Keats's fragment was not published until 1898 – as though it took the advent of modernism to produce an editor who could perceive the value of the poem's (unintended?) auto-referential ambiguities. This historical lag between literary innovation and literary-critical perception poses a rich theoretical problem, which I can't take up here but which is thoughtfully addressed by Geoffrey Hartman in "The State of the Art of Criticism." In any event, Keats's auto-referential artifact is only one among very many to be found in the period, which enacted the self-grounding poetics of auto-referentiality in an astonishing variety of ways (see Bode, *Selbst-Begründungen*). For a full and distinctly Bodean treatment of the role of this poetics in the developing philosophy of (German) literary theory see Andrew Bowie's *From Romanticism to Critical Theory*, *passim*.

tional expectations and manipulates them in such a way that their tendency to semantic foreclosure will be *pleasurably* exposed and relaxed, so that the resulting semiotic opening may be perceived not as error to be rejected but rather as opportunity to be taken, "a unique offer," in the terms of Bode's "focus" aesthetics, "to experience something new and unusual" ("The Aesthetics" 82; emphasis removed). Extending this offer explicitly to his audience with respect to their literary and social-affective expectations, Wordsworth creates a potent and, in the long view of subsequent literary history, truly revolutionary first approximation of Ambiguity Mark II.

Ambiguity in Affect: "Simon Lee"

Though Bode doesn't dwell on the *affective* correlates of the aesthetics of ambiguity, he makes it clear that even Ambiguity Mark I is a product not only of textual design but of the reader's perception of that design, and this perception, he further suggests, is always fraught with emotion. Ordinary linguistic signs assume extraordinary meaning possibilities in the self-constituting system of a literary text, but only when some reader recognizes the system as such and invests the effort to decode it accordingly (beginning with an initial identification of the work as "literature" rather than scholarship, journalism, correspondence, etc.). As Wordsworth well knew, this receptive, interpretative effort is, in the first place, *affective* as much as it is *cognitive* or *semantic*, a point on which Bode touches as well:

> the rules and patterns of everyday language are not binding for literary texts, which constitute their own codes. These idiosyncratic codes are, of course, not ready to hand for the reader – he has to find them or even constitute them by actively engaging in this secondary structuring of a given text in the act of reading. *This activity can be arduous and frustrating or delightful and rewarding* – it all depends. (74; emphasis added)

It does indeed depend, on any number of factors – on the complexity of the text, on the preparation and disposition of the reader, on the particular circumstances in which the reading takes place, and more – but at all events productive effort is sure to correlate with affective temperature, whether positively or negatively, and differently for different readers at different times. A reader's openness even to Ambiguity Mark I is always mediated and, as Bode implies here, perhaps even fundamentally motivated by affective expectations and reactions. This must be all the more the case with Ambiguity Mark II, which presumably manifests itself at the level of affect according to the degree to which the literary event calls explicit attention to its *affective self-constitution in the reader's experience.*

On this definition, a founding document of literary modernism must be *Lyrical Ballads*, not so much for the theoretical preface (vital as that is) but for the poetic "experiments" themselves, which in a variety of ways explicitly devolve to the reader the job of active and affective meaning-making that the poet might well have been expected to carry out himself (Wordsworth and Coleridge 47). The *locus classicus* of this

pointedly rhetorical as opposed to personally expressive poetics[7] appears in "Simon Lee, The Old Huntsman, With An Incident In Which He Was Concerned," when, following nearly 70 lines of exposition, and anticipating the mere 20 that will presently deliver the whole of the admittedly incidental narrative action, the poet interrupts himself mid-stanza to flout (albeit gently) his audience's expectations of him as a tale-teller:

> My gentle reader, I perceive
> How patiently you've waited,
> And I'm afraid that you expect
> Some tale will be related.
>
> O reader! had you in your mind
> Such stores as silent thought can bring,
> O gentle reader! you would find
> A tale in every thing.
> What more I have to say is short,
> I hope you'll kindly take it;
> It is no tale; but should you think,
> Perhaps a tale you'll make it. (ll. 69-80)

The deferential politeness of this unexpected speech act palliates but doesn't otherwise diminish its illocutionary force, which is not apologetic but imperative. Only readers who are prepared to answer this obviously unusual demand, who "can bring" to the narrative the significant action that they would conventionally expect to be brought, well and fully formed, by the narrating poet, only those readers will have any hope of taking it "kindly" that their "patience" has been so far (and then only so far) taxed. Don Bialostosky identifies Wordsworth's rhetorical scheme here as *epitrope*, whereby a speaker refers "to the abilities of the audience to supply the meaning that the speaker passes over"; generally speaking, "epitrope can be either biting in its irony, or flattering in its deference" (550). Epitrope, in other words, already makes for ambiguity, and it is therefore inherently risky with respect to readers' affective responses and, in turn, their constructive effort at sense-making, as Bialostosky explains:

> Readers may well wonder, as the definition suggests, whether the speaker is throwing down the gauntlet to them or throwing up his hands at what he has been trying to tell. Is he ragging them for their mistaken thoughtless expectations or urging them thoughtfully and kindly to make something of his telling that he is somehow unable to tell? They must decide, and the choice makes all the difference. If they don't take this gesture kindly and resent his calling them on their conventional expectations, they have decided to blame the poet for his intrusion and, if I may, his confusion in this poem, and they are not likely to grant him the presumption that he might be doing something worth thinking about in it or any of his other experiments. If they are willing to look closely at the

7 A distinction that Parrish was the first to insist upon: "The purpose of the poet's creative activity is not to give his feelings expression under the dictates of Nature, but to shape them under the control of Art so as to evoke responsive feelings in the reader" (32).

> non-tale that comes next and back at what had led up to this moment, they may find many provocations to think [...]. (550-51)

Provocatively indeed, Wordsworth insists not only that his readers pay close attention to the *felt* dimensions of their own responses – their highly conditioned but usually unconscious sensitivities to the pace, proportion, and purport of the unfolding narrative sequence – but also that they take personal responsibility for these responses, whatever they may be, and gauge their potential relation to the tale's explicitly underdetermined meaning. Having invited readers, as it were, to take their own narrative pulse and temperature, Wordsworth then prescribes the homeopathic effort of their own "mind[s]" to modulate any unpleasant affective symptoms they may be experiencing, such as rising impatience with the poet for what may appear to be generic ineptitude (or "unkindly" behavior). 'Please think before you react too hastily and judge wrongly,' Wordsworth effectively advises his readers: only apparently "simple" in form and development, the poet's "song" will in truth speak volumes, but exclusively "to thinking hearts" ("Hart-Leap Well" l. 100).

In "Simon Lee," Wordsworth steps in rhetorically to acknowledge and underline the priority of *affect* in the processes and results of literary response: it is the reader's *heart* that must do the thinking, or, less metaphorically, it is the reader's mind that must *feel* its way toward the new thought that Wordsworth's experimental poetry may, just on condition of this affective effort, constitute. Wordsworth thus surrenders authorial responsibility for predetermining the affective processes and results he is nonetheless calling for, indeed insisting upon. Instead of the expected one-to-one relation between a given form (word, image, plot element, etc.) and its affectively meaningful value in the developing narrative, Wordsworth self-consciously provides a one-to-many relation between poetic forms and their possible responsorial values. He aims, in other words, at the condition of ambiguity,[8] prescribing to a vast diversity of readers the activity of *thinking* but not, surprisingly, the specific form or content of the *thoughts* they should thereby think. This is not to suggest that the poet exercises no control over his readers' responses, but only that his control is calculated to restore and foster, rather than restrain and foreclose, the semiotic generativity of readers' individual responses, their productive capacity to formulate relevant but non-identical meanings from a single text or even a single linguistic form.

Wordsworth further insists, moreover, that his readers *be aware* (= "beware!") of the affective effort and investment to which he is hereby summoning them.[9] It is this

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8 I am drawing here upon, but at the same time expanding to embrace discourse units of any kind, the most concise technical definition available for linguistic ambiguity: "Ambiguity [...] is a many-one relation between syntactic entities and expressions" (Gillon 400).

9 Again, this is part and parcel of Wordsworth's essentially *rhetorical* as opposed to *expressive* poetics: "Taste, Wordsworth explains, is an awkward and inexact metaphor. It appears to denote only a passive faculty, but 'the profound and the exquisite,' 'the lofty and universal, and in plainer prose 'the pathetic and the sublime,' if they are to be com-

explicitness in Wordsworth's code-challenging strategy that raises the stakes of his literary game from Ambiguity Mark I to Ambiguity Mark II. As James Averill has argued, early readers of *Lyrical Ballads* would have easily recognized the kinds of sentimental situation Wordsworth stages in his poems, for these were the conventional stuff of late-eighteenth century literature, in which exquisitely sensitive speakers and narrators routinely encountered and proudly bemoaned the desperate suffering of such stock figures as "the beggar, the disappointed lover, the discharged soldier, the abandoned woman" (54). In this poetics of sentimentalism in which Wordsworth and his first readers were equally schooled, the quality of the reader's affective response was already centrally at issue, but that response was normally guided and constrained by a focalizing figure to its appropriate, which is to say entirely overdetermined, consummation. In Averill's words,

> [t]ypically, there is a character in late-eighteenth-century literature whose primary function lies in his response to sentimental objects. Figures such as Yorick, Tristram, Belford, Harley, and even Rasselas mediate between human suffering and its ultimate audience. We watch this person watch the victims, and often we watch him watch someone else who responds to the suffering. (28)

While in many instances this voyeuristic formula results "in a complex layering of narrative" whose "sum of responses is anything but simple or naively emotional," still, its basic mechanism is affective contagion, that is, an *express communication* from the author through the character-narrator to the reader that "serves to guide the reader's response," precisely by modeling one or more authorized forms for that response to take (28, 29).

Born from this school of sensibility, Wordsworth's lyrical balladry is nevertheless "rather more self-conscious and artful, which perhaps is one of the grounds of his extraordinary originality and success" (Averill 30). As we've seen, Wordsworth's self-conscious art acknowledges but in the same rhetorical breath intentionally frustrates the generically conditioned expectation that his text will provide a determinate model for the reader's affective response. Where sentimental readers expect (pre)determination – 'Please show me exactly what I must feel' – Wordsworth provokingly invites their participation – 'How are you feeling, and why? What *might* you feel, and accordingly think?' One of the earliest and ablest of Wordsworth's critics, Charles Lamb, pinpointed exactly this refusal to provide authorial instruction as the chief strength of *Lyrical Ballads*' more successful poetic ventures. As he tends to do with Wordsworth, Lamb gives the compliment in a back-handed way, in the process of complaining that another poem, "The Old Cumberland Beggar," patently fails in this crucial regard, like most of its forerunners in the sentimental tradition:

> I will just add that it appears to me a fault in the Beggar, that the instructions conveyed in it are too direct and like a lecture: they don't slide into the mind of the reader, while he is imagining no such matter. An intelligent reader finds a sort of insult in being told,

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municated as the poet feels them, all require 'the exertion of a co-operating *power* in the mind of the Reader'" (Parrish 20).

> I will teach you how to think upon this subject. This fault, if I am right, is in a ten-thousandth worse degree to be found in Sterne and many many novelists & modern poets, who continually put a sign post up to shew where you are to feel. They set out with assuming their reader to be stupid. Very different from Robinson Crusoe, the Vicar of Wakefield, Roderick Random, and other beautiful bare narratives. – There is implied an unwritten compact between Author and reader; I will tell you a story, and I suppose you will understand it. (Qtd. in Wordsworth and Coleridge 462)

Truly a reader after Wordsworth's own heart, Lamb wishes his author neither to tell nor to show where and how he is to think and feel; rather, the text's sense should "slide into the mind of the reader" from his or her own effort to "understand," which is to say, to construct possible interpretations of, a narrative sequence that is generatively "beautiful" to the extent that it is "bare" of affective "sign-post[ing]." The great difference between Wordsworth at his best and the best models in the tradition he follows – Lamb's examples are "Robinson Crusoe, the Vicar of Wakefield, Roderick Random" – is that Wordsworth explicitly discloses the normally "implied" and "unwritten compact between Author and reader" according to which the author supplies an unadorned tale and the reader makes what can intelligently be made of it.[10]

Indeed, in "Simon Lee," Wordsworth writes this reader-licensing "compact" directly into an ostensibly sentimental ballad, just before he springs the central narrative incident that his audience has more or less patiently awaited but in which they are likely, without special effort on their own parts, to be disappointed. Primed by the youth-age contrast spelled out in the patience-trying exposition, a majority of Wordsworth's first readers would already have recollected George Crabbe's portrait of a similar "hoary swain" in *The Village* (1783) and would have formulated their sentimental expectations of the poem's governing theme and purpose accordingly:

> He once was chief in all the rustic trade,
> His steady hand the straightest furrow made;
> Full many a prize he won, and still is proud
> To find the triumphs of his youth allow'd;
> A transient pleasure sparkles in his eyes,
> He hears and smiles, then thinks again and sighs:
> For now he journeys to his grave in pain;
> The rich disdain him; nay, the poor disdain;
> Alternate masters now their slave command,
> And urge the efforts of his feeble hand;
> Who, when his age attempts its task in vain,
> With ruthless taunts of lazy poor complain. (Book 1, ll. 184, 190-201)[11]

As Lamb might complain, Crabbe's authorial instructions concerning "how to think" and "where to feel" mar what might otherwise be a "beautiful bare" descriptive por-

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10 See Stein (164) for a closely related discussion of this poetics.

11 Qtd. in Wordsworth and Coleridge 507. I'm grateful to a student, Kristen Moore, whose seminar paper in a course on Wordsworth alerted me to this analogue and the important evaluative differences it brings to light.

trait. Unambiguous cues direct the reader to inhabit the speaker's moral perspective and thus to mirror both his sympathetic regard for this rural "slave" and his righteous indignation at the swain's "Alternate masters": so, for example, "the *efforts* of his *feeble* hand" meet with "*ruthless* taunts of *lazy poor*." Clearly the socially distributed attitude of unfeeling "disdain" for such a character, shared alike by "rich" and "poor," is to be rejected out of hand; clearly Crabbe's "gentle" reader is being not-so-gently guided into a position of sympathetic feeling he or she might not otherwise be prone to occupy:

> How would ye bear in real pain to lie,
> Despis'd, neglected, left alone to die?
> How would ye bear to draw your latest breath,
> Where all that's wretched paves the way for death? (Book 1, ll. 15, 260-63)

Wordsworth's version of the same sentimental dilemma picks up where Crabbe's leaves off and consciously complicates its overdetermined sensibility. As though answering Crabbe's demand that real fellow-feeling supplant social distance and disdain, Wordsworth's speaker offers to help an old man when, as with Crabbe's "hoary swain," "his age attempts its task in vain." The previewed brevity of the main action notwithstanding, Wordsworth spares narrative time and linear space to emphasize through reiteration this allusive relation of his poem to Crabbe's, evidently doing everything in his power (short of direct quotation or a footnote) to assure its uptake:

> One summer-day I chanced to see
> This old man doing all he could
> About the root of an old tree,
> A stump of rotten wood.
> The mattock totter'd in his hand;
> *So vain was his endeavour*
> That at the root of the old tree
> He might have worked forever.
>
> 'You're overtasked, good Simon Lee,
> Give me your tool' to him I said;
> And at the word right gladly he
> Received my proffer'd aid.
> I struck, and with a single blow
> The tangled root I severed,
> At which the poor old man so long
> And *vainly had endeavour'd*. (ll. 81-96)

And yet, though Wordsworth's speaker has clearly done the Crabbean right thing and might therefore expect in return at least a modest affective payoff of Crabbean complacency and self-satisfaction, Simon's "glad" "thanks" and gushing "praises" for this good turn well done paradoxically leave the speaker "mourning" (ll. 98, 104). The poem thus abruptly ends, leaving its reader in turn not with the expected model response but rather with an unanticipated question of affect: what exactly does it mean to mourn gratitude?

Reacting to this truly extraordinary and provocatively underdetermined climax, Michael Gamer and Dahlia Porter capture the state of generative and irreducible ambiguity in which Wordsworth has emphatically placed his reader. I quote their reading at length because it illustrates so neatly the unpredictable semiotic potential that is unleashed by Wordsworth's auto-referential refusal to predetermine readers' affective responses to his tale:

> It is a wonderfully troubling and powerful ending, where the speaker's sudden act and resulting state of mind provide the materials out of which Wordsworth's reader must 'make' a tale. For in spite of its plain language, this is not a simple act of neighborly charity; the episode is as psychologically complex as the speaker's response to it. During the description of Simon Lee struggling with the rotten stump [...] we become increasingly aware of the speaker's impatience, which mirrors our own desire for some kind of narrative resolution. The speaker's discomfort produces his blunt words ("'You're overtasked, good Simon Lee,/Give me your tool'") and equally blunt action ("I struck, and with a single blow/The tangled root I severed"), both of which bring with them overtones of brutality. After all, the speaker does not ask Simon Lee if he needs help, but instead tells him he is "overtasked" and demands his tool. The 'single blow' he strikes with Simon's mattock, meanwhile, forms an apt counterpart to the ambivalence (nicely captured in Simon's tears) and emotional violence of the scene, in which the speaker, though ostentatiously performing an act of kindness, essentially confirms to an old working man that he has become useless as a laborer. The poem's final stanza sustains rather than resolves these mixed feelings. Just as we wonder whether the speaker has been spurred by irritation rather than pity, we are forced to puzzle out why Simon's copious gratitude has left the speaker mourning. ("Introduction" 21)

Paying special attention to the possible emotional valences that may be ascribed to the speaker's words and action, Gamer and Porter gamely rise to Wordsworth's epitropic demand that they "make" up for themselves the meaning(s) of this radically unconventional tale. If their resulting interpretive gambits aren't exactly the ones that emerge in your own meaning-making efforts, this only demonstrates how productively open to alternative constructions Wordsworth's beautiful bare narrative really is. Notably, the keynotes of Gamer and Porter's reading are "psychological complexity," "ambivalence," and "sustain[ed] [...] mixed feelings," and they end their discussion just where they began it, in the still unresolved need, despite their interpretative best guesses, "to puzzle out" the undisclosed meaning of the speaker's "mourning." Clearly, Wordsworth's carefully staged (anti)climax remains for them "a wonderfully troubling and powerful ending," a perfectly telling phrase in which three terms denoting very different kinds of affect – "wonder," "trouble," and "power" – make unexpectedly common cause.

"New Compositions of Feeling": The Modernity of *Lyrical Ballads*

This productive state of unusually mixed feelings is precisely the effect Wordsworth intended *Lyrical Ballads* to stimulate; he aimed to *move* his readers affectively to new and more fully human understandings of their complicated kinship with others. As he

puts it in a letter of 1802 to John Wilson, a young devotee who had written Wordsworth to express his deep admiration for *Lyrical Ballads* and whom Wordsworth in response reciprocally commends for having "studied the poems, and [...] entered into the spirit of them":

> You have given me praise for having reflected faithfully in my Poems the feelings of human nature. I would fain hope that I have done so. But a great Poet ought to do more than this: he ought, to a certain degree, to rectify men's feelings, to give them new compositions of feeling, to render their feelings more sane, pure, and permanent, in short, more consonant to nature, that is, to eternal nature, and the great moving spirit of things. (Wordsworth 292, 295-96)

Though Wordsworth's final phrases here are more sounding than illuminating, elsewhere the same letter makes clear that feelings "consonant to nature, that is, to eternal nature" must be defined in contrast to "modes of sentiment, civil and religious," that are determined by cultural situation rather than biological endowment and that are therefore historically variable and changeable (296). Such modes of sentiment constitute, as it were, pre-determined codes of *affective* decision, and it is these in particular that Wordsworth targets for auto-referential reconstruction in *Lyrical Ballads*.

Wordsworth's specific example in the letter is "The Idiot Boy," which Wilson had questioned for representing a mentally disabled child, a subject he viewed as essentially unfit for poetic treatment. By eighteenth-century standards, not only of poetic judgment but of everyday or "civil" sentiment, Wilson might well have been expected so to object[12]: Wordsworth had indeed violated accepted decora of taste and feeling in writing "The Idiot Boy." But it is just these socially mediated decora, felt in the viscera more often than meditated in mind, that Wordsworth sees as historically vulnerable and subject to change, *given the right affective stimulus*. He very much intends that "The Idiot Boy" will be such a stimulus, "rectify[ing] men's feelings" by urging them into "new compositions" in which normally distinct emotional states are mixed up ("com-posed," "posed together") in unusual and enlightening ways. Wordsworth easily diagnoses the pre-determined code of affective decision that inhibits Wilson's response to "The Idiot Boy":

> The loathing and disgust which many people have at the sight of an idiot, is a feeling which, though having some foundation in human nature, is not necessarily attached to it in any virtuous degree, but is owing in a great measure to false delicacy, and, if I may say it without rudeness, a certain want of comprehensiveness of thinking and feeling. Persons in the lower classes of society have little or nothing of this [...]. (296)

"Loathing and disgust" in this instance derive less from the affective constitution of "human nature" than from a "false delicacy" cultivated among the higher classes of eighteenth-century Britain (and, alas, well beyond). Wordsworth could obviously an-

12 Wilson was hardly alone; even Coleridge balked, most prominently in *Biographia Literaria*, chapter 17. This only shows how pervasive and powerful socially distributed codes of feeling really are, and just what Wordsworth was up against in trying to break them not so much down as open.

ticipate his "gentle" readers' antipathetic response to his "Idiot Boy," but he proceeds on the assumption that his best chance for rectifying this shallow and unexamined sensibility lies, not in didactic instruction (*pace* "The Cumberland Beggar"), but rather in the solicitation of countervailing feelings that, in Lamb's words, "slide into the mind of the reader, while he is imagining [or, better, *anticipating*] no such matter." With "The Idiot Boy," Wordsworth hoped to prompt such readers as Wilson toward new compositions of social feeling in which their needlessly delicate sentiments would be productively complicated by unexpected interest and, finally, sheer delight.

Rather than penning his own self-defensive responses to Wilson's praises and protestations and thereby bringing on the "violent" headache with which he rather shamelessly concludes (298), Wordsworth might have avoided all this painstaking and simply referred Wilson to the February 1801 review of *Lyrical Ballads* in *The British Critic*, in which another young devotee, John Stoddart, had already made Wordsworth's case for him. Stoddart admits at the outset that, "as to the subjects [of Wordsworth's poems], it must be owned that their worth does not always appear at first sight; but, *judging from our own feelings*, we must assert, that it generally grows upon the reader by subsequent perusal" (qtd. in Wordsworth and Coleridge, 402; emphasis added). Stoddart then proceeds to specify the "cause[s] of this improving interest" that arises when the reader "judg[es] from [his] own feelings," the chief of which "consist[s] in a gentle agitation of contending emotions, from which a preponderance of pleasure is ultimately produced" (402, 403). Just so, in "The Idiot Boy," unanticipated sympathy and delight are meant to contend with and finally overbalance expected antipathy, while in "Simon Lee," anticipated and therefore too easy sympathy is "troubled" (as Gamer and Porter have it) and thereby "improved" (to use Stoddart's term) by the unexpected – and pointedly unexplained – admixture of mourning. But Stoddart frankly acknowledges what Bialostosky and the rest of us, two centuries on, still must: such "rich and noble" affective results are not to be had "without a persevering effort toward attention on the part of the reader" (403). "Effort toward attention" is a nice way of putting it, for attention is to be paid not so much to what is *in* the text, which demands an "effort *of* attention," as to what may be discerned *through and beyond* the text, in the reader's unfolding and no longer unconscious response, thanks to a further and more self-reflexive "effort *toward* attention." When this self-attending kind of attention is brought to bear on Wordsworth's poems, Stoddart continues, when the reader is actively alert to the text's affective suggestions and not just passively awaiting prescriptive recipes of authorial instruction that are in any event not forthcoming, "the general effect is so insensibly produced, and appeals so forcibly to the heart, as to rank the author far beyond the reach of common-place praise or censure" (403).

Stoddart's critical acuity at this very early stage in Wordsworth's reception history no doubt owes a great deal to the fact that he stayed with the Wordsworths in Grasmere for a week in the fall of 1800, when the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* was still in press and the poetic issues at stake in the volume were preoccupying Wordsworth's mind and conversation. Presumably, as Robert Woof has suggested,

Stoddart garnered much of his critical insight straight from the horse's mouth and could be counted on to recapitulate it in print, which helps to explain why Wordsworth "recommended" to Stoddart that he write the review (18, 20).[13] In any event, having Stoddart's review in hand helps to clarify what is possibly the most historically pregnant idea of Wordsworth's "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads*, respecting the principal "circumstance which distinguishes these poems from the popular Poetry of the day": "that the feeling therein developed gives importance to the action and situation and not the action and situation to the feeling" (Wordsworth and Coleridge 176). Accordingly, in "Simon Lee," a trivial situation and minimal action are invested with significance by the surprisingly composite "feeling therein developed," not by the tale's narrator but by its reader, who must surmise through the perseverant labors of his or her own thinking heart the affect-laden meaning(s) that the poet was conventionally expected to provide but has here expressly refused to supply. Wordsworth thus contrives, as he declares outright in the "Preface," to "plac[e] my Reader in the way of receiving from ordinary moral sensations another and more salutary impression than we are accustomed to receive from them" (Wordsworth and Coleridge 176). This is an explicit description, at the minimum and *avant la lettre*, of Ambiguity Mark I, whereby "ordinary" sensations and "accustomed" impressions, our pre-determined codes of everyday decision, are supplemented and (re)ambiguated by "other and more salutary" sensations, impressions, and feelings, conducing to unanticipated meanings and (if Wordsworth's poetic faith is justified) improved interpersonal understanding. To the extent that, in the experimental poems thus prefaced,[14] Wordsworth makes this supplemental semiotic potential of the literary event explicit, enforcing the reader's awareness of his or her own affective role in the production of the text's possible meanings, his strategy signals a conscious turn toward Ambiguity Mark II and thus, in due course of time, to the multiple-code-breaking poetics of modernism.

Put it this way: without an audience prepared to have its feelings productively toyed with by the literature it consumes, the further experimental provocations of literary modernism – grammatical, conceptual, intermedial, and more – would hardly have been possible.

13 But other contemporary critics, such as James Montgomery writing in the *Eclectic Review*, perceived the author's original affective purposes quite independently of his guidance: "His *Cumberland Beggar*, *Tintern Abbey*, his *Verses on the naming of Places*, and some other pieces in his former volumes, have taught us new sympathies, the existence of which in our nature had scarcely been intimated to us by any preceding poet" (qtd. in Reiman 334).

14 For a discussion of the affective workings of this rhetorical poetics in *The Prelude*, see Bruhn.

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