The Lucy Poems and Wordsworth's Dream Vision

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JORDSWORTH'S "Lucy" poems have always been celebrated for their unique beauty, but most early commentaries were primarily concerned with a search for the historical Lucy. Only much later did critics treat the poems as a thematic whole or a dramatic sequence which deserved more serious attention. Despite their variety of interpretations, most recent studies approach these haunting ballads as love poems and conclude that Wordsworth's ultimate interest in them touches in one way or another upon his major theme of the relationship between man and Nature.1 While I agree with the main thrust of such arguments. I think that the ballad form still obscures our perception of the thematic similarities the "Lucy" poems share with other works more generally accepted as characteristic of Wordsworth's thought. neath the seeming simplicity of these ballads is a richness of structure and imagery that can guide us beyond the poet's stance as lover and the elliptical nature of his story. In particular, we can define more precisely Wordsworth's view of the "wedding" of man and Nature in these poems by approaching the experience they describe as a dream vision similar to that found in several other Romantic narratives which portray a pattern of imaginative escape and return. Just as Keats' famous knight searches for the meaning of his dream in La Belle Dame's elfin grot. Wordsworth's lover enters the mysterious world of Lucy's bower to explore another "fond and wayward" illusion. "Lucy" cycle as a whole reenacts the same basic situation: the speaker's awakening from some sort of "slumber" which

has "sealed his spirit" to face "the memory of what has been, / and never more will be."

Although this approach to the poems shifts the focus from Lucy to her effect upon the speaker, it is still necessary to comment on what she symbolizes since it involves a fundamental assumption that underlies my interpretation. In the broadest sense, Lucy provides the poet with a concrete symbol for those "beautiful idealisms" such as immortality and happiness which were the object of the Romantic quest, but she also represents a variation of the Jungian archetype that Lionel Stevenson in his essay on Tennyson called the "high-born maiden," or the maiden in the tower.2 According to this psychological interpretation, the poet projects through the image of a woman a personification of his anima, his unconscious. Tennyson's maidens, however, Lucy is neither imprisoned nor unhappy, and Wordsworth's attitude is a sympathetic one unclouded by the strong condemnation characteristic of one phase in Tennyson's development of the symbol. Furthermore, as the subtitle of "Lucy Gray" makes clear, Lucy more precisely embodies solitude rather than the isolation Tennyson explores in his poems on the "Palace of Art" theme.3 Nevertheless, Lucy conforms to the basic pattern as she dwells in a bower-like retreat "among the untrodden ways" and shadows forth an image of the poet's "soul" that is sublime yet elusive. The analogy with Tennyson's poems is also helpful because it suggests that looking at the "Lucy" poems solely as amatory verses or ballads yields as limited and misleading an impression as it would if we brought a similar focus to "The Lady of Shalott." Hidden away by the poet in her magic ring of solitude, Lucy personifies "light", the creative imagination,4 and the story the "lover" unfolds becomes another one of those characteristic Wordsworthian encounters with a solitary upon whom he projects his own inner conflicts.

This interpretation is reinforced if we notice that both Lucy and the landscape she inhabits are "wild", a word that in Wordsworth's symbolic topography is used to describe both the secluded bower and the limitless vista. "Wild" can suggest both extremes — just as Lucy is both a humble flower and a star set like a diamond in the heavens — since it usually links solitude with Wordsworth's concepts of the sublime and the imagination. In particular, Lucy's green bower and the dark moor of Lucy Gray reflect similar symbolic qualities for the poet in that they are essentially timeless realms. Lucy's cottage is a still point which walls out the sublunary — and literally, sub-lunar concerns of the larger social world. Similarly, because Lucy Gray's footprints vanish rather than end and because her song has been fused with the passing wind, the visionary moor seems almost to stretch out of time and into infinity. Lucy herself takes on the spirit of the place, just as the "beauty born if [its] murmuring sound / . . . pass[es] into her face." Wordsworth shapes our sense of her sublimity by giving her an air of mystery in most of the poems. We imagine her like Louisa - whom some critics would include in the "Lucy" canon — sitting "beneath the walls / Of some old cave, or mossy nook" ("Louisa"). Wordsworth blurs the lines of her portrait so that she is always "half hidden from the eye," and the paths to her cottage are paradoxically "untrodden." Finally, however, it is her effect upon her lover that reminds us of the Wordsworthian She touches his inner levels of consciousness so sublime. that he moves beyond ordinary perception. She is a mysterious violet that makes him think of the outer boundaries of the universe, the stars. Her cottage somehow fixes his eyes outward and upward to the moon, inspiring "fond and wayward thoughts" of death. As Wordsworth comes to realize in both The Prelude and "Tintern Abbey," the source of the "sense sublime" is to be found not only in the

light of setting suns, And the round ocean and the living air, And the blue sky. . . . ("Tintern Abbey," ll. 97-99)

but ultimately "in the mind of man." The search for Lucy, then, becomes another instance of the Romantics' internalized quest and leads us not to the solitary lady but into the inner world of the poet's experiences.

It follows that the narrator offers us more than merely a point of view; he is the real subject of the poems. In some of the poems, we are not aware of any particular relationship between the speaker and Lucy until the poem ends with a kind of coda which reveals his response to the events he has described. He may lament, "But she is in her grave, and, oh, / The difference to me!" or he may offer his consolation, that she

Left to me This heath, this calm, and quiet scene; This memory of what has been, And never more will be.

In other poems, his feelings — that he has suffered "strange fits of passion" or realized more fully his love for Lucy as he "travelled among unknown men" — frame from the beginning his story about Lucy. Whatever the case, we cannot adequately interpret her life without considering the narrator's situation: "A slumber did my spirit seal."

But the "Lucy" poems are not about the narrator in the sense that the other *Lyrical Ballads* are. A sure sign of this is that we do not hesitate to identify the narrator of the "Lucy" poems with Wordsworth himself, and, certainly, we do not feel here that the poet's intent is to investigate the psychological workings of some other person's mind—his stated purpose in "The Thorn," for example. This narrator also differs from his counterparts in the other ballads because he is not relating an incident which presumably happened recently. Years seem to divide Lucy's story from the present moment, years which only the poetic memory can shape into meaning. In this respect the "Lucy" poems are closer in design and theme to "Tintern Abbey" than to the other ballads.

In "Strange Fits of Passion" a final stanza that Wordsworth later omitted presents a clear picture of the speaker's

dramatic situation, a moment in which the past and present are fused: "And when I think upon that night / My eyes are dim with tears." Through the medium of the memory, the continuing life of the past provides a spiritual basis for the speaker which is implied but not stated: "- Yet some maintain that to this day / She is a living child." As he muses about Lucy, who is perhaps "rolled round . . . / With rocks and stones, and trees," the precise meaning of her legacy is not clear, but it is insisted upon by the strength of his reaction: "my eyes are dim with tears." In "I Travelled among Unknown Men" we picture him at the meeting point of two landscapes, present and past: "And thine too is the last green field / That Lucy's eyes surveyed." If we can describe these poems, therefore, on one level as a remembrance of things past, we recognize further their affinity with the subjective strain of poetry that Wordsworth was working on during this same period, and we can understand more fully the necessity for considering the significance of the speaker.

The most notable thing about the speaker, besides his love for Lucy and his grief when she is dead, is that while she is alive he seems to exist at some abnormal level of consciousness. If we were unkind, we might call it a stupor, for on the fictional surface of the poems Wordsworth certainly means that the lover did not understand or appreciate Lucy's true worth. But Wordsworth's language suggests much more. He describes this state as a "slumber" and further elaborates: "In one of those sweet dreams I slept, / Kind Nature's gentlest boon!" this kind of consciousness is "sweet" and as gentle as slumber, perhaps the lover's confession that he "had no human fears" should not be interpreted as a mark of his insensitivity. His form of dreaming appears to be active, not the passive, almost frozen lack of animation that we first assume it is. His "strange fits of passion" cause him to make associative links which normally would not be open to him. Far from being closed, his vision is concentrated — "Upon the moon I fixed my eyes" — and creative, with "fond and wayward thoughts" rushing into his head. Also, despite the diffidence of "fond," since his presentiment that Lucy is dead is fulfilled, then his slumber approaches Keats' concept of Adam's dream: "he awoke and found it truth."

It is the nature of his slumber that makes the experience in the "Lucy" poems a kind of dream vision, although the external form and apparent focus preclude classifying them as such. In all of the poems the narrator's imaginative sleep is powerful enough to transform Lucy in effect into "a thing that could not feel / The touch of earthly years." The dream testifies once more to Lucy's sublimity, her power over the speaker's mind, an effect similar to what Wordsworth had recently described as:

—that serene and blessed mood, In which the affections gently lead us on,—Until, the breath of this corporeal frame And even the motion of our human blood Almost suspended, we are laid asleep In body, and become a living soul: ("Tintern Abbey," ll. 41-46)

Calling this slumber a dream vision seems appropriate, not only because under its influence the lover is actively creating images of Lucy, but also because it involves almost a freezing of time (cf. "even the motion of our human blood / Almost suspended"). In "Strange Fits of Passion" he escapes — at least for a while — from the spatial and temporal measures which his horse's hoofs rhythmically mark off by hypnotically fixing his eye on the moon which hangs in another sphere as a symbol of permanence and imagination. Because he has "sealed" his spirit from time, he is surprised at "How soon my Lucy's race was won!" By admitting, "I had no human fears," he reveals that he has been living in a world that denies the future. We saw previously that Lucy's bower was located in a timeless realm, and it is clear now that the lover's "sweet dream" has

released his sympathetic imagination and allowed him entrance to that world. At one time, then, he believed that he too "could not feel / The touch of earthly years."

The conclusion of each poem, however, shocks the narrator with the knowledge that both he and Lucy are subject to the touch of mortality, as we are informed that "she is in her grave." Only when the dream vision ends does it reveal the ultimate index of its power to transport the lover to an almost mythic world beyond the boundaries of time, for until then we do not discover that its main purpose has been to keep him from any thoughts of death. When these thoughts finally intrude upon the narrator, he learns the implications of literal death, that it is man's mortality which makes him a creature of time and divorces him from a full and lasting union with nature. The poem becomes his epitaph as well as Lucy's.

The problem, then, is not so much that Lucy dies, but that the speaker must awaken. The situation seems similar to the one Keats faces in the "Ode to a Nightingale." When the narrator's "slumber" ends, he is not snapping out of a doltish, unperceptive fog about Lucy's true nature, but actually returning to that "dull brain" which "perplexes and retards" after fading away into the forest dim around Lucy's bower "on the viewless wings of Poesy." awakening reflects his inability to sustain the level of consciousness or vision suggested by Lucy's state of being. Moreover, the poem implies that the only way of achieving this, if one is not a child or nature goddess whose "race" is suddenly ended, is by dying - just as Keats finally perceives that to "leave the world unseen" with the nightingale means his death. Thus, we discover at the end of the "Lucy" poems a new solitary, not Lucy but the lover for whom her death is "like a bell / To toll me back from thee to my sole self!"

Keats would have spoken of the poem as a "greeting of the Spirit" and its object, but Wordsworth often called such visionary moments "spots of time." Although these experiences are usually autobiographical in content and form, what Wordsworth here calls a "slumber" shares their essential characteristics: the preliminary emotional context, the trance-like state in which the mind actively colors the objects of outward sense, and the succeeding calm when the memory shapes and "enshrine[s] the spirit of the past."9 Unlike Keats, Wordsworth does not try in his "spots of time" to merge with his object — not in the sense that Keats wished to become, he said, a billiard ball in order to feel its roundness - but instead, as an example of the "egotistical sublime," he projects his own feelings and concerns onto the symbol. Nevertheless, in such experiences the interest of both poets lies in the workings of the imaginative mind. Lucy's "wildness," her power to symbolize the spirit of a place, and her freedom from the restrictions of time all show how she could provide Wordsworth with a way of talking about his concept of the imagination. Not only is it possible that he is playing upon the Latin word for "light" in her name, but the "She" of line three in "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal" may also refer grammatically to "my spirit" as well as to Lucy. Wordsworth also links Lucy in several of the poems with the star, an important image that he used in poems such as "London, 1802" and the "Intimations Ode" to symbolize the imaginative soul.

Viewing Lucy as a symbol for the imagination leads to a new understanding of the climax of the poems. Despite its literal implications for the lover, Lucy's death is primarily metaphorical. Paradoxically, it does not testify to her humanness — "rolled round . . . / With rocks, and stones, and trees," she somehow escapes our fate. We should particularly notice that, even though her death may be unexpected to her lover, it is no accident. Wordsworth suggests that death is the logical completion of Nature's plan for Lucy: "Thus Nature spake — the work was done — / How soon my Lucy's race was won!" It allows her to fulfill her role as Persephone, becoming the flower

gathered and confirming that the favorites of the gods die young. The question, however, is why Wordsworth should conceive of such a natural and inevitable connection between Lucy and death.

Poems of the same general period, 1798-1802, which center upon the child supply a partial answer. Most of them depict a causal relationship between solitude, vision, and death. Little Hartley Coleridge, for example, is first described almost as if he were a poet, a "faery voyager" with his "self-born carol" whose true nature can be realized only in the timeless landscape "Where earth and heaven do make one imagery" ("To H. C."). Yet Wordsworth prophesies about him that "Nature will . . . end thee quite," and, interestingly, the very reason he worries about the child is because he is "so exquisitely wild" — because he has, or is, a "blessed vision." It is his imaginative life, like Lucy's, that consigns him to certain death:

Thou art a dew-drop, which the morn brings forth, Ill fitted to sustain unkindly shocks, Or to be trailed along the soiling earth; A gem that glitters while it lives, And no forewarning gives:
But, at the touch of wrong, without a strife Slips in a moment out of life.

Wordsworth is expressing here what will become a common Romantic insight: that the "strange disease of modern life" threatens the imaginative existence of seers like the scholar-gypsy or Hartley. As a symbol, however, death has more positive connotations for Wordsworth. He seems to be pointing to death in the "Lucy" poems as a sign of the imaginative solitary's state of grace. In delving into the mysteries of the imagination and of what G. Wilson Knight calls our ultimate "I"-ness, Wordsworth almost equates individual personality with death. Death is somehow responsible for the uniqueness that makes Lucy "fair as a star, when only one / Is shining in the sky." Like her solitude, it creates the boundaries of a world where we are at once sealed off from the numerous and chaotic vicissitudes of the flux and locked into a comprehensive relation-

ship. Lucy's death, therefore, symbolizes the permanence of her imaginative vision, the state of being she embodies. It ensures that she will never lose her "wildness" nor fail to haunt the landscape like a solitary roe or a wind-driven song. Significantly, Lucy Gray "never looks behind," and the other Lucy's race is "won," not finished. Far from reaching an end, Lucy finds the continuity and permanence of an endless cycle, "rolled round in earth's diurnal course." She is gathered up into the eternity of solitude and death before she can feel those "human fears" which trouble the calm of nature. Wordsworth could have said of Lucy. as he did of The Prelude's "lovely Boy," that death was her "special privilege" (Book VII, 375). Ultimately, death and solitude symbolize the same sort of imaginative vision and integration with nature, so that when we behold Lucy or the solitary child they appear "Like one of those who walk'd with hair unsinged / Amid the fiery furnace" (The Prelude, VII, 369-70).

At the conclusion of the "Lucy" poems, however, the speaker can behold a vision like this only if he is able to revive Lucy's image through memory. Since time, in the form of human fears, inevitably intrudes and shatters the dream vision, he is denied direct access to Lucy's world. This interpretation underscores the radical difference between Lucy's and the speaker's level of consciousness, a question which Wordsworth had posed, but without really exploring, at least as early as "We Are Seven." Figures like Lucy in the poetry written between 1798 and 1802 are usually children or nature goddesses who possess a vision which the poet can attain only in what he calls his "god-like hours." Wordsworth's relation to such figures is not as clearly and explicitly defined as it will be in the "Intimations Ode" or in the sonnet where he addresses his child:

Thou liest in Abraham's bosom all the year; And worshipp'st at the Temple's inner shrine, God being with thee when we know it not. ("It is a Beauteous Evening," ll. 12-14) But even in the "Lucy" poems he is already writing a kind of emblematic poetry. Once again the external character of the poems — their seeming objectivity and the "strange half-absence" of Lucy's almost mythic world — obscures their relationship to Wordsworth's poems of open subjective musings. But Lucy is a mediating symbol like the Solitary Reaper or Dorothy in "Tintern Abbey." Wordsworth hears in Lucy Gray's solitary songs what he reads in the "shooting lights" of Dorothy's wild eyes. Whether standing on Lucy's heath with the "memory of what has been, / And never more will be" or turning to Dorothy on the banks of the Wye and "beholding in thee what I once was," in both incidents the symbols mediate between the present and the past, between Wordsworth and the numinous realm.

Wordsworth continued to dwell on his childhood memories in the next few years, and there is a corresponding increase in the importance of emblematic figures. They range from the butterfly —

Stay near me — do not take thy flight! A little longer stay in sight! Much converse do I find in thee, Historian of my infancy! Float near me; do not yet depart! Dead times revive in thee —

to the "wandering Voice" of the cuckoo -

Thou bringest unto me a tale Of visionary hours.

And I can lie upon the plain And listen, till I do beget That golden time again —

and culminate in the "Child of Joy," whom Wordsworth addresses in the "Intimations Ode." Wordsworth urges the child to "shout round me, let me hear thy shouts, thou happy Shepherd-boy!" because the child's mirth is like the "two-fold shout" of the cuckoo, speaking of a bright world which the "philosophical mind" can approach only through a glass, darkly. These symbols allow the sacramental imagination to join nature's holiday "in thought." 11

The poet of the sacramental vision is left with complex feelings at the end of these poems. On the one hand, the relationship between the figure he contemplates and nature offers a meaning which adds continuity to his life. He may not dwell in an antediluvian world himself, but the rainbow upholds the promise and nourishes his faith that there is a dark inscrutable workmanship which harmonizes the important experiences of our lives:

My heart leaps up when I behold
A rainbow in the sky:
So was it when my life began;
So it is now I am a man;
So be it when I shall grow old,
Or let me die!
The child is father of the Man;
And I could wish my days to be
Bound each to each by natural piety.

In the "Lucy" poems Wordsworth finds the same continuity or "natural piety" by a cyclic return to a particular spot — Lucy's cottage beneath the moon, the English landscape where she once played — and by a creative act of the memory which revives dead times and Lucy's relationship to nature and to himself — "The memory of what has been, / And never more will be" — and by contemplating the eternal cycle which finally subsumes Lucy:

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.

Yet it is important that "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal" comes last in the 1815 (and final) ordering of the "Lucy" group, for it reveals that the speaker's response to Lucy's death — or her present state — is more ambivalent than we had previously suspected. To him, she had once "seemed a thing" invulnerable to time, but her death has ironically substantiated or fulfilled that attitude, actually changing her into a "thing," a perhaps inanimate object embedded along with rocks and stones in the earth's primal motion. The implications here add a disturbing gloss to Wordsworth's ideal in "Tintern Abbey" of the divine motion

which impels and "rolls through all things." Lucy's marriage with Nature seems to have stripped her of sensory perception — "She neither hears nor sees" — and individual identity: "No motion has she now," apart from that of the rocks with which she is indiscriminately grouped. Even the peace which crowns Lucy's race and dominates the speaker's memory is "the silence and the calm / Of mute insensate things." Wordsworth's ideas here are not so far removed from those he developed in what we usually call his stoical poems. At this time, in poems such as "Animal Tranquillity and Decay," "Michael," and "Simon Lee" he was studying the process of man's integration with the natural forces through the images of those who endure like trees,12 not flowers with Lucy or "Nutting" 's "violets of five seasons that re-appear / And fade, unseen by any human eye." Later, he also gives expression in The Prelude to his own fears about a loss of identity, for example when the normal sensory activities are suddenly "usurped" by the unfathered vapors of the imagination (Book VI, 525 These aspects of the "Lucy" poems show that the development of Wordsworth's ideas was not strictly linear in the sense that he often held different and even antithetical or irreconcilable attitudes at the same time, and that, like most Romantic symbols, his image of Lucy is more suggestive and complex than the deductions we can draw from it.

Northrop Frye has argued in "The Drunken Boat" that what the Romantic poets shared was not a single theory of poetry or political philosophy but a similar vocabulary of images, and I think that his thesis helps to explain one reason why the "Lucy" poems have been more highly valued than most of the other *Lyrical Ballads*. Viewing the experience Wordsworth describes in the "Lucy" poems as a dream vision and concentrating on such images as the bower and Lucy's "wildness" show that in these poems, as in Wordsworth's other seminal poems, he was exploring persistent concerns through certain structures and clusters

of images which recur in many of his other major poems. What I have described here as a dream vision is not so different from the "blessed mood" Wordsworth had just described in "Tintern Abbey" or the vision of the Arab he was to relate in Book V of *The Prelude*. This approach broadens the context in which we read the poems, and Lucy becomes not just a maiden in love poems which give expression to the Romantic yearning for union with an ideal but one of those haunting figures of solitude who become essential features of Wordsworth's evolving myth.

NOTES

- The most recent articles devoted solely to the "Lucy" poems which share this basic approach are Frances C. Ferguson, "The Lucy Poems: Wordsworth's Quest for a Poetic Object," ELH, 40 (1973), 532-548; Spenser Hall, "Wordsworth's 'Lucy' Poems: Context and Meaning," SIR, 10 (1971), 159-175; Terry Otten, "Action in Wordsworth's 'Lucy' Poems: A Reading," Illinois Quarterly, 34 (1971), 18-29; and James G. Taaffe, "Poet and Lover in Wordsworth's 'Lucy' Poems," MLR, 61 (1966), 175-179.
- ²"The 'High-Born Maiden' Symbol in Tennyson," *PMLA*, 63 (1948), 234-243.
- ³My reasons for considering "Lucy Gray" as a part of the group are implicit in the argument.
- ⁴Sacvan Bercovitch makes this same point in his article, "Lucy and Light: An Interpretation of Wordsworth's Lucy Poems," English, 16 (1966), 11-12, but he does not develop it or explore how it affects the traditional interpretations of the poems.
- ⁵This particular observation is made by F. W. Bateson, "Rational Irrationality: She Dwelt Among the Untrodden Ways," The Northern Miscellany of Literary Criticism, 1 (1953), 41-46. Bateson's article was one of the first interpretations to bring out the verbal complexity of the "Lucy" poems.
- ⁶This is the last line of an additional stanza which concludes the poem in the 1799 MS. See the standard Ernest De Selincourt text, *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1944), II, 29.
- ⁷For a more detailed discussion of the significance of movement in the poem, see Geoffrey Durrant, *William Wordsworth* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1969), pp. 62-63.
- 8The Letters of John Keats, 1814-1821, ed. Hyder Rollins (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958), I, 243.
- ⁹For an example of what Wordsworth means by this kind of experience, consider Book XII of *The Prelude*, 11. 208-335, especially 11. 284-285. All quotations from *The Prelude* are from the 1850 text as presented in *The Prelude or Growth*

- of a Poet's Mind, ed. Ernest De Selincourt, second edition revised by Helen Darbishire (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959).
- 10The Starlit Dome: Studies in the Poetry of Vision (London: Oxford University Press, 1941), p. 13. Knight explains that Wordsworth characteristically thinks of the "profundities" of the individual personality as being like abysses, points within the soul "where all stand single" (The Prelude, III, 185), and that he often relates his sense of these mysterious recesses to the sublime features of nature or to experiences that centre around terror and death. Like the sublime, death is an other-worldly force that is analogous to the otherworldly power within, the subjective self in its dark abysmal nakedness.
- ¹¹David Ferry was the first critic to discuss extensively Wordsworth's development in terms of a "sacramental imagination." See *The Limits of Mortality: An Essay on Wordsworth's Major Poems* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1959), pp. 29-31.
- ¹²Geoffrey Durrant offers this overview of the poems written during this period in Wordsworth and the Great System: A Study of Wordsworth's Poetic Universe (London: Cambridge University Press, 1970), p. 163.
- ¹³The essay is included in *Romanticism Reconsidered*, ed. Northrop Frye (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), pp. 1-25.