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**A LESS THAN GREEN AND PLEASANT LAND; OR, THE  
YOUNG WORDSWORTH'S ENVIRONMENTALISM<sup>1</sup>**

The insistence upon the benefit of pastoral living is a familiar theme in English Romantic expression. In 1795, Coleridge wrote a letter to George Dyer claiming “we ... become ... the best possible [in] the country [when] all around us smile Good and Beauty” (154). It is a perception that has led Jonathan Bate to insist in *Romantic Ecology*: “If the French Revolution was one great root of Romanticism, then what used to be called ‘the return to nature’ ... was surely the other” (7). Yet, knowing what we do of the industrialization that is currently working its way across China and other developing countries, just how good or beautiful could the “country” really have been during the 1790s? Kenneth Johnston argues in his controversial biography on Wordsworth that “Tintern Abbey” was triggered by the poet’s shock at the scores of beggars he saw about the ruins, as well as at the “wreathes of smoke” that were spewing out from the iron works along the Wye valley (590-4). In fact, because these foundries were powered by wood

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful for the Nanzan University Pache Research Subsidy 1-A-2 for the 2009 academic year, without which this project would have been unthinkable.

charcoal, James McKusick adds that the river was probably contaminated with toxic by-products and the surrounding landscape marred with extensive deforestation (66).

Johnston and McKusick's approach is characteristic of the ecocritical turn taken in Romantic studies at the end of the twentieth century. Where the fields and forests of the Romantics had been investigated by M. H. Abrams and other mid-twentieth century scholars for universalistic morals or ideals, Romantic representations of nature are now connected with historical realities or political action. A number of critics have objected to the newer method as a purely modern imposition. "Environmentalism" is a twentieth century word. The greening of politics is certainly indebted to astronaut Bill Anders' iconic photograph of a bright blue Earth rising over the lifeless grey horizon of the moon on December 24, 1968, which inspired millions to see for the first time our world "not as continents or oceans, but as ... beautiful and small" (McKie 13). Nevertheless, a recognizable rhetoric of ecological concern, that is, one bespeaking the need for conservation based on an awareness of the limited nature of our planet and its resources can be detected in French and British sources well before the Romantic period. The

adverse ecological impact of colonization on the West Indian and African islands did not escape contemporary observers who petitioned for the control of logging, hunting, fishing and industrial effluents to mitigate the effects of European occupation (Grove 168-308). In science and philosophy, Comte de Buffon and Jean Jacques Rousseau were linking climate with human development; indeed, Richard Grove's *Green Imperialism* amply delivers on his promise to illustrate how "as early as the mid eighteenth century, scientists were able to manipulate state policy by their capacity to play on the fears of environmental cataclysm, just as they are today" (1). As a social phenomenon, as a politics, environmentalism has existed as long as the destructive conditions of colonial rule.

Johnston and McKusick's argument for the environmental degradation taking place in the English countryside rests, however, on slim foundations: six lines of verse (lines 18-23) from "Tintern Abbey".

... ["Once again I see"] these pastoral farms  
Green to the very door; and wreathes of smoke  
Sent up, in silence, from among the trees,  
With some uncertain notice, as might seem,  
Of vagrant dwellers in the houseless woods,  
Or of some hermit's cave, where by his fire

The hermit sits alone. (*Lyrical Ballads* 202)

Fortunately, similar references to the deleterious effects of human activity on the natural landscape may be found elsewhere. For example, in “Goody Blake and Harry Gill”, which was published along with “Tintern Abbey” in the 1798 *Lyrical Ballads*. As one of the only four poems actually mentioned in the “Advertisement”, its importance to Coleridge and Wordsworth’s seminal oeuvre cannot be overstated. Indeed, it is this poem which most vividly conveys Wordsworth’s two overriding concerns of environment and class. The connection between a deteriorating environment and the condition of the working class will be further reinforced through a close reading of “Lines Written in Early Spring”, which was included as well in the 1798 collection. There is a deep pessimism underlying both poems, and this is indicative of the limits of Wordsworth’s radicalism even in the teeth of his radical years. The poet of the 1798 *Lyrical Ballads* was no revolutionary. With respect to class, if he was disillusioned with the middle class, he also all too clearly doubted whether anything better could be expected from the working class. With respect to the environment, he was not quite the ideal representative of the ecological “return to nature” that current mainstream ecocriticism has made him out to be. In the young Wordsworth, it will be

shown, the impossibility of this return constituted a constant refrain. In other words, he did not see salvation coming out of either Red or Green.

The literature on the first Industrial Revolution is prodigious and familiar. As an ongoing still readily observable process in many parts of the world, it should not be too great a presumption to simply assert that it has invariably been accompanied by radical change to rural and wilderness habitats. With the Romantics, historically orientated writers have for the most part related their meditations on the fields and forests to the enclosure movement. This approach probably originated with Karl Marx, whose primary preoccupation was the alienation of the working class under industrialization. “[T]he original sources of all wealth”, as stated by Marx, are “the soil and the labourer” (515). Living in Victorian London with its packed streets and a countryside dominated by livestock farming, he acidly wrote: “The labourers are first driven from the land, and then come the sheep” (430).<sup>2</sup>

Wordsworth’s poem “Goody Blake and Harry Gill” offers in miniature the very class struggle that Marx read in the green, hedgerow-parceled fields

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<sup>2</sup> Timothy Morton is the first to notice the subversive potential of this seemingly innocuous sentence (86).

that still largely constitutes the English rural landscape. A brief overview of the plot should make this more apparent. Goody Blake, an old poor weaver finds herself short on winter fuel. One night, she decides to help herself to an apronful of the hedge surrounding Harry Gill's farm. It is a course of action that she has had to resort to many times, and predictably the time eventually comes when she finds him waiting for her. With one arm the rich, young, livestock farmer catches her and shaking her like a brace of prized fish cries out in triumph: "I've caught you at last!" Where the sympathies of the reader might be expected to lie is clear enough, however, quite uncharacteristically for a Wordsworth poem the proletariat figure does not end up in an unmarked grave for Blake actually proves victorious: she casts a powerful spell that not only forces Gill to free her, but also leaves the erstwhile "lusty drover" a sickened and diminished man. "Goody Blake and Harry Gill", as the prefatory "Advertisement" for the 1798 *Lyrical Ballads* indicated, was based on "a well-authenticated fact which happened in Warwickshire" (iv). By relocating his vision essentially of marginalized humanity "in Dorsetshire" (87), Wordsworth anticipates Marx's demonization of the English countryside by more than fifty years. In a county well-known in the eighteenth century for its fat sheep and cattle (Harrison 378) people go cold

and hungry. One can read in the impossibility for Blake, whether “well or sick” to accomplish something as basic as gathering “wood or stick, / Enough to warm her for three days” (*Lyrical Ballads* 88), how completely the modern economy has destroyed the relationship between the soil and the worker.<sup>3</sup> If she reminded Wordsworth’s readers of a medieval witch so much the better, because then it might have also occurred to them that in those bygone times the very earth beneath her feet would have been adequate to sustain her. In the Middle Ages people could use the land around their cottages to grow a variety of food crops, to graze a cow or to keep a flock of chickens; they could forage the forest nearby for berries and mushrooms to supplement their diet, and of course for firewood. But *now*, in Wordsworth’s time as much as ours, Blake is expected to be dependent on a global marketplace that supplies needs and wants from “far by wind and tide” (*Lyrical Ballads* 87). For middle-class farmers like Gill have enclosed away the land for their exclusive use. As for the forest, it is simply no longer there: under the circumstances evoked by the poem cut down to make way for

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<sup>3</sup> “There is much evidence of difficulty in procuring firing for the hearths of cottage homes during the period, and historians of all shades of opinion have conceded that enclosure, together with every step towards the more efficient use of wastelands, had a tendency to deprive the poor of such sources as peat, brushwood, and rough timber” (Armstrong 748-9).

pasture, elsewhere, cut down to build cities and the ships for war or commerce.

In the most authoritative work to date on English agrarian history, Hugh C. Prince has categorically stated that the “clearing of woods to add to the area of farmland ... had reduced woodlands in south-west England to tiny remnants by the end of the eighteenth century” (66). An immediate effect of this would be to drive up the cost of firing, that is, “the feeding or tending of a fire or furnace” (*The Oxford English Dictionary*), by forcing an increasing dependence on more expensive foreign imports: as the eponymous heroine reminds readers, “country coals are dear, / For they come far by wind and tide” (*Lyrical Ballads* 87). The increased hardship this represented for cottagers like Blake can be easily inferred from the proportion of their income that they were already expending on firing: according to Arthur Young, whose survey of 1771 included the adjacent counties of Hampshire and Somerset, even back then it had ranked overall as the second most expensive of the principal “articles of a poor man’s housekeeping” (308-9). From the beginning of the war to 1810 however, as Steven J. Watson points out, timber prices rose by a further 300% (522). This drove many rural



people to the kind of desperate action committed by Blake. During the particularly hectic period of enclosure between 1793 and 1803, for instance, there were famine-sparked crime waves of “nocturnal marauders” damaging fences and hedges, and stealing corn and poultry (Wells 155-74). In 1798, when faced with a wood-thief, one Parson James Woodforde simply decided to let the man go on a promise of future good conduct (106-7). In view of what was happening across the country, this was a decision motivated less by benevolence than a calculating practicality. The revolutionary potential that Marx notoriously saw in the working class was after all founded upon their vast numbers. That Wordsworth usually chose to depict them singly, as opposed to Marx who “always portrays a crowd” (Simpson 112), was probably undertaken to render them less threatening. In the poem under discussion here, the bourgeois figure who resorts to violence not only reaps his own destruction, there is also the unmistakable warning at the end to the members of his class: “Now think, ye farmers all, I pray, / Of Goody Blake and Harry Gill” (*Lyrical Ballads* 93).

I wonder what the Anglican churchgoers I used to hear so energetically belting out the hymn “Jerusalem”, which boasts of a free, evergreen

England, would have made of the fact that the country has actually the lowest forest cover in Europe. Forest and woodland only make up about 7% of the land surface in England (*UK Clearing House Mechanism for Biodiversity*), far below the current EU average of around 40% (United Nations Committee on Environmental Policy). Despite observing the “blight” of industrialization through the country in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, P. M. Harman believes the effects to be “confined”:

Woodlands retained ecological diversity, hedgerows kept their utility. [...] Much of the ‘traditional’ English landscape remained. But there were complex relations between industrial and agricultural changes and the shape of the landscape. (12)

What—we should proceed to ask—about the absence of trees? If the “hedgerows kept their utility”, it was as Wordsworth represented more for the middle-class farmer than for cottagers like Blake who would have preferred to convert the whole into firewood. The “‘traditional’ English landscape” Harman refers to, is the result of an opportunistic and predatory pattern of middle-class land development. If the already wolf-less, bear-less and boar-less hills, forests and rivers retained any “ecological diversity” at all it was not by design, but because they had been too costly for methods at

the time to appropriate and exploit.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, Harman's judgement seriously underestimates the impact of the new "complex relations between industrial and agricultural changes and the shape of the landscape" on rural communities. People were cramming in ever greater numbers into the towns and cities because, as "Goody Blake and Harry Gill" dramatizes, industrialization was literally making the land unfit for the working class. That fine, subversively defamiliarizing statement of Marx's—"The labourers are first driven from the land, and then come the sheep"—allows us to sense the loss, struggle and sheer suffering underwriting the ubiquitous green grass of England.

To a Marxist approach, whether carried out under the aegis of New Historicism or Cultural Materialism, the 1798 *Lyrical Ballads* is a veritable mine of insight. Nevertheless, despite the broad parallels that have been drawn between the young Wordsworth and Marx, it must also be recognized that the former was never invested as Marx was in a proletarian revolution.

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<sup>4</sup> Sophie Gee's recent observation on John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, in which she remarks how an environmental phenomenon is either glorious "abundance" or useless "overgrowth" depending on whether or not it is part of an "obedient" landscape (62), neatly encapsulates the ideology of enclosure.

Even “Goody Blake and Harry Gill”, where Wordsworth seemed closest to Marx, never makes the bourgeois unconditionally hateful in the way they are in *Capital*. As it is mentioned earlier Goody Blake wins, and the consequences are such that they are surely intended to elicit pity at least for the vanquished farmer:

Alas! that day for Harry Gill!  
That day he wore a riding-coat,  
But not a whit warmer he:  
Another was on Thursday brought,  
And ere the Sabbath he had three.  
  
'Twas all in vain, a useless matter,  
And blankets were about him pinn'd;  
Yet still his jaws and teeth they chatter,  
Like a loose casement in the wind.  
And Harry's flesh it fell away;  
And all who see him say 'tis plain,  
That, live as long as live he may,  
He never will be warm again. (*Lyrical Ballads* 92)

If the bourgeois figure is not completely hateful, then neither is the proletarian figure entirely engendering of sympathy either. Given the general Christianity of the nation, it is difficult to imagine a more problematic heroine than a witch: indeed, both Whig and Tory reviewers criticized the poem for spreading superstition (*Critical Review* 200; *British Critic* 367).

Furthermore, the flippant, distancing poetical tone portraying Gill is equally unsparing of Blake:

All day she spun in her poor dwelling,  
And then her three hours' work at night!  
Alas! 'twas hardly worth the telling,  
It would not pay for candle-light.  
—This woman dwelt in Dorsetshire,  
Her hut was on a cold hill-side,  
And in that country coals are dear,  
For they come far by wind and tide.  
  
By the same fire to boil their pottage,  
Two poor old dames, as I have known,  
Will often live in one small cottage,  
But she, poor woman, dwelt alone. (*Lyrical Ballads* 87)

The wood thievery mentioned previously was one consequence of the record high timber prices. Another especially regrettable outcome was the impact on the eating of cooked food, which became a luxury for the poor; Cobbett, according to Watson, wrote of Cornishmen paying three pence to cook mutton on another man's fire (522). Wordsworth's observation in "Goody Blake and Harry Gill" that "two poor old dames ... often live in one small cottage" to pool their resources in a comparable way is taken from Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (220), but it also highly likely from

the shared historical context that both Wordsworth and Radcliffe were alluding to real life circumstances. To return to Wordsworth's representation of Blake, the undeniable logic of sharing a fire from an economic and ecological standpoint does make it sound as if she should be doing the same, and the fact that she chooses not to cannot but count against her. When the depredations that the middle-class experienced or feared in the countryside are factored in, it is difficult to see how the response of *The Monthly Review* to her "plunder of an individual" would have been anything but overwhelmingly convincing to the poem's target readers:

The hardest heart must be softened into pity for the poor old woman;—and yet, if all the poor are to help themselves, and supply their wants from the possessions of their neighbours, what imaginary wants and real anarchy would it not create? (206-7)

There is something clearly wrong with Harry Gill. There is something wrong with Goody Blake, despite the weight of sympathy Wordsworth loaded in her favour (and, it is worth adding, in the favour of the members of her class in general in his poetry). There is something wrong with the poet himself, at least as implicated in the voice that he assumed. For it is surely disturbing that the narrator depicts Blake's deprivation and Gill's suffering in such a sardonic, trivializing manner. With no one left unscathed, everyone

in “Goody Blake and Harry Gill” is effectively in the wrong. Why this should be is hinted at in “Lines Written in Early Spring”, where amidst the trees and birds of springtime the poetical persona uncovers his alienation:

The birds around me hopp'd and play'd:  
Their thoughts I cannot measure,  
But the least motion which they made,  
It seem'd a thrill of pleasure.

The budding twigs spread out their fan,  
To catch the breezy air;  
And I must think, do all I can,  
That there was pleasure there.

If I these thoughts may not prevent,  
If such be of my creed the plan,  
Have I not reason to lament  
What man has made of man? (*Lyrical Ballads* 116)

He cannot think the thoughts of the birds around him; he cannot feel the feelings of the trees as the wind brushes their finger-like twigs: he can only imagine their pleasure and only with difficulty (“I must think, do all I can”). To say that the idyllic state of nature affects him because of the contrast it offers to the human world does not go quite far enough. First, within the confines of this paradigm, “What man has made of man” seems little more than a pathetic refrain on the human condition. This misses the specific

political drift of the poem, which emerges when it is read not as an autonomous work but as part of an overall poetical oeuvre. Taking into consideration how the *Lyrical Ballads* is essentially a series of hard cases of working-class life for example, the final line of “Lines Written in Spring” becomes a reminder of what the middle and upper classes have done to the people below them. It is a meaning emphasized through the direct address it makes to the reader, who in Wordsworth’s time was almost invariably genteel. Second, it is easy to miss the subtle innovations that Wordsworth introduced to the usual Man-Nature binary. Given how slippery and proliferate our concepts of “nature” are,<sup>5</sup> it might be overlooked how the “birds”—and earlier on in the poem—the “primrose-tufts” and the “grove” are no more “nature” as such than the “human soul”, but “her fair works”. Apart from eschewing familiar conventions, there is furthermore the unorthodox idea here of the soul being a collective essence rather than an individual possession. Instead of “My soul”, or “The soul that was in me”, the poem reads “The human soul that through me ran” (*Lyrical Ballads* 115).

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<sup>5</sup> Consider: we use the word to refer to plants and animals, geological and climatological processes, to physics; indeed, conceptually, it can include existence in its entirety, or, rather paradoxically, be used to exclude material phenomena that has been “poisoned” by human intervention. The problem, as Morton neatly summarized, is that “Nature wants to be both substance and essence at the same time” (18).



Bearing these distinctions in mind, the poet persona's failure to find a way out the tragic predatory cycle of "What man has made of man" acquires logical resonance. No escape is possible because of the ties of sympathy (common soul) that bind all men indissolubly together: even in a place where there is no one else about, the poet persona cannot help but feel aggrieved at the oppression of the working class. No solution appears possible because the evil is intrinsic: the division between land and labourer initiated by the enclosure system, the suffering brought about by war and other social ills could simply be the outward manifestations of a soul that is pathologically out of joint with all Creation.

The quest for absolution fails, but is any other outcome truly anticipatable? The ballad form Wordsworth opted for is predisposed to loss. It is a negative outcome that is prognosticated in the pastness of the poem, and when it is finally revealed it is delivered with the force of fate: as a clinching repetition ("What man has made of man") at the end of an enjambment that completely upends the easy, regular rhythm the stanza begins with. It is in a sense an outcome that should be expected from the young Wordsworth in whose poems the failure or impossibility of a return to

nature constituted a constant refrain. This is evident from his very first publication, *An Evening Walk*, in which the portrait of a family of swans living in idyllic peace in Penrith valley is directly contrasted with that of a human family whom the very same environment seems intent on killing (15-19).

The impossibility of a return to nature is again mired in convention. There was the influence of “picturesque” principles where, under the so-called aesthetic of the “sublime”, the physical landscape was repeatedly arranged according to a rubric that stages in Christopher Hitt’s words “a disorientating or overwhelming confrontation with a natural object” (605). There is of course the older idea of the Fall that represents the return to Eden, an effortless and bountiful *au naturel* living, as barred. Twenty-first century concepts of dark ecology and urbanaturalization<sup>6</sup> are driven by the impatience that has developed over these fatalistic positions that are still too frequently preconceived vis-à-vis “nature” because of the influence of Christianity and Romanticism. The underlying message of Timothy

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<sup>6</sup> I thank Ashton Nichols for alerting me to this term. Urbanaturalization—as it is understood here—describes the assimilation of plant and animal life into an urban ecosystem (e.g. rooftop wetlands, eagles roosting on skyscrapers, etc).

Morton's provocatively entitled *Ecology Without Nature* would undoubtedly be that we never left "nature" in the first place.<sup>7</sup>

Whatever the weight of convention, with respect to Wordsworth, what critics may have missed is the fact that this failure to return to nature is more insistent in his early works. The two very different Wordsworths promulgated recently by David Simpson and P. M. Harman is essentially a divide caused by chronology. Simpson's Wordsworth, "well-known for lamenting the increasing distance of man from nature", and for being "the astute analyst of the inevitability of just this process" (137), is the young Wordsworth discussed here. Harman's Wordsworth, who "finds in nature ... social life and community" (166) and who asserts "the sublime immediacy and immanence of the active powers permeating nature" (169), belongs to the later Wordsworth of *The Excursion*, *Guide to the Lakes* and *The Prelude*. Harman's optimistic Wordsworth, who Anne-Lise François celebrates as well for "the capacity ... to find blessedness is mere existence" (60), is observable from the earliest version of *The Prelude*:

Ye powers of earth, ye genii of the springs,

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<sup>7</sup> "The final word of the history of nature is that *nature is history*" (21).

And ye that have your voices in the clouds,  
And ye that are familiars of the lakes  
And of the standing pools, I may not think  
A vulgar hope was yours when ye employed  
Such ministry—when ye through many a year  
Thus, by the agency of boyish sports,  
On caves and trees, upon the woods and hills,  
Impressed upon all forms the characters  
Of danger or desire, and thus did make  
The surface of the universal earth  
With meanings of delight, of hope and fear,  
Work like a sea. (5-6)

In the *Lyrical Ballads* of 1798, however, nature offers no such assurance. Even in “Tintern Abbey”, where, on the basis of its non-balladic form, and its position at the end of the collection, an affirmatory denouement or consolation of sorts might reasonably be expected, the revelation on offer is far more tentative and problematic. Wordsworth’s famous perception of the interconnectedness of all things in the One Life passage (207) is prompted by loss, and undermined by his need for Dorothy to love and remember him: he is quite starkly no longer the youth to whom “nature ... was all in all” (205).

Whatever the weight of convention, the fact that the young Wordsworth adopted its pessimistic rhetoric finally suggests why he could never have supported revolutionary change. Despite him participating in celebrations over the fall of the Bastille, despite his obvious sympathy for the suffering of the working class, if there is something intrinsically evil in everyone, then he must doubt everyone and anyone's ability to break free of the tragic predatory cycle of "What man has made of man". In 1795, in *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch*, Immanuel Kant declared his now famous conviction that

The peoples of the earth have thus entered in varying degrees into a universal community, and it has developed to the point of where a violation of rights in *one* part of the world is felt *everywhere*. The idea of a cosmopolitan right is therefore not fantastic and overstrained; it is a necessary complement to the unwritten code of political and international right, transforming it into a universal right of humanity. Only under this condition can we flatter ourselves that we are continually advancing towards a perpetual peace (107-108).

Though the "human soul" in "Lines Written in Early Spring" echoes Kant's concept of a sympathetic "universal community", the Englishman's homeostatic defeatism has completely departed from the German's revolutionary enthusiasm. (Humanity's union, under Wordsworth's formulation of a shared human soul, reaps only the consciousness of a

common corrupted state.) While the pervasive pessimism of the young Wordsworth is not completely unknown, what has perhaps been overlooked is the negative implication such an ideology must ultimately hold for his radical credentials.

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