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Wandering in Fact and Fiction: Wordsworth's Wanderer and Christopher Thomson

Discussing Wordsworth's poem "Goody Blake and Harry Gill," Geoffrey Tillotson writes that "Goody herself . . . could not have given a more telling account of her way of life" (7). I wonder. Goody Blake, like other cottagers, had ample time to think, spinning days away in a house by herself. She may have participated more fully in the life of her community than Wordsworth did and therefore been able to comment more fully on the daily and yearly rituals, the shared ethos, and solitary decisions that make up a "way of life" in a particular place. But, as Wordsworth himself writes, the "Strongest minds / Are often those of which the noisy world / Hears least" (*Excursion*, book 1, lines 95–97). We would never dream of teaching an introduction to Romanticism class with works about women but none by them, but our representation of laboring-class people in the Romantic period has largely been left to leisure-class authors. By obscuring the impoverished authors of the period, we have impoverished our understanding of the period itself. For many undergraduates, Goody Blake, Simon Lee, and their poor but virtuous kin supply the only images of Romantic-period working-class life.

Over the last thirty years, the world of British Romantic studies has begun to hear more from the real-life Goody Blakes and Simon Lees of the

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period. In 1984, the historians John Burnett, David Vincent, and David Mayall cataloged 804 working-class autobiographies from British authors who wrote about life between 1790 and 1900 (Burnett et al.). Of these, eighty-four laboring or artisanal authors were born before 1800 and thus wrote about lives that were contemporary with Wordsworth and his laboring characters. These eighty-four were more low and urban than low and rustic (which Wordsworth would probably have them be), because networks of adult education and publishing were generally more accessible in towns and cities than in rural districts. Nevertheless, many of these autobiographies overlap thematically with Wordsworth's poetry. Several critics have subsequently written about these autobiographies, raising their visibility somewhat. Regina Gagnier's *Subjectivities: A History of Self-Representation in Britain, 1832-1920* pays special attention to working-class subjectivities. Jonathan Rose's *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* focuses on the reading habits revealed in several autobiographies, and my *Literature by the Working Classes: English Autobiography, 1820-1848* analyzes five working-class autobiographies in more detail. These works help familiarize Romantic scholars with laboring-class authors' self-representation and thus make good starting points for professors who want to add laboring-class autobiography to their syllabus.

Still, incorporating examples of this self-representation into course material can be difficult. By 1826, James Lockhart was moaning in the *Quarterly Review* that "England expects every driveller to do his Memorabilia," but the contents of Romantic-period anthologies do not reflect the "mania for this garbage of Confessions and Recollections" that Lockhart found so disturbing (149, 164). Paul Keen includes excerpts from the bookseller James Lackington's 1791–92 *Memoirs* as well as the 1824 *Autobiography* of the tailor Francis Place in his *Revolutions in Romantic Literature: An Anthology of Print Culture*. Professors who do not use Keen's anthology, however, will have to search for primary texts to include on their syllabi. James R. Simmons's *Factory Lives: Four Nineteenth-Century Working-Class Autobiographies* is a useful resource for teachers wanting to cover industrialization in depth. *Google Books* has digitized several working-class autobiographies from the early nineteenth century. Students can access these for free and then, as part of a writing or class presentation assignment, seek out the contexts and reception history by searching periodicals and newspapers in *Google* or their library's online databases.

One electronically accessible autobiography in particular, *The Autobiography of an Artisan*, by Christopher Thomson, offers grounds for comparison

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with Wordsworth's *The Excursion*. *The Excursion* is an important text for teachers of laboring-class literature because of its extended representation of the language and experience of laboring-class characters. The Wanderer provides insight into the experience of itinerancy shared by many of the period's workers. The poem is experimental, wandering in form to reinforce what Alison Hickey calls its "wandering philosophy" (25). Because Thomson's *Autobiography* also wanders formally and represents working-class wandering from the perspective of someone who personally experienced it, the two texts pair nicely for teaching. Reading *The Excursion* and *The Autobiography of an Artisan* together invites students to contemplate the conventions that devalued workers' accounts of their lives before mid-century, and it enables them to glimpse a side of life in the Romantic period that has been distorted by the displacement of leisure-class nostalgia onto idealized lower-class characters.

Since Wordsworth himself had little firsthand knowledge of working-class cultures, the "telling account of [a] way of life" that Tillotson praises him for producing should not stand as the only representation of British working-class life on a syllabus. When Reverand Hardwicke Drummond Rawnsley went to Westmoreland and spoke with older folks there who remembered Wordsworth, everyone he spoke with agreed that "Wudsworth never said much to t' fowk, . . . He was distant, ye may saäy, verra distant" (26). Thomson's autobiography describes wandering through different village cultures as Wordsworth's Wanderer does, but Thomson engages local people naturally and necessarily in order to complete daily tasks, such as securing accommodation for his family or arranging work. His experience parallels that of Wordsworth's character in interesting ways. Thomson, like the Wanderer, was born of a Scottish father who was absent for much of his childhood. Like the Wanderer, he began working at a young age. Because of his work as an actor and house painter,

> From his native hills
> He wandered far; much did he see of Men,
> Their manners, their enjoyments and pursuits,
> Their passions, and their feelings. (*Excursion*, book 1, lines 369–72)

Because of these similarities and Thomson's more immersive knowledge, *The Autobiography of an Artisan* offers particularly valuable insight into the manners, enjoyments, and pursuits of the rural subjects that ostensibly form the subject and object of Wordsworth's poems.

Comparing these two works makes visible several distinguishing features of working-class self-representation in the period, the most important being the poor accessibility of education and the portrayal of physical deprivation. The struggle for education features prominently in nearly every working-class autobiography of the early nineteenth century. As David Vincent remarks, knowledge "was seen [by laboring-class authors] as the essential pre-condition for the pursuit of freedom" (*Bread* 109). Thomson, like most of the working-class autobiographers, longs for the day when "the soul-creating wings of education" will prepare a working-class child to be a "world-adorner and citizen" instead of a little labor machine shuttled off to "the black night-day of the coal pit, or the body-warping toil of the factory" (170). In contrast to this, Wordsworth's Wanderer is content with limited access to education, "for many a Tale / Traditionary, round the mountains hung" (lines 181–82).[1] In his eagerness to demonstrate the adequacy of rural oral literature, Wordsworth glosses over two important historical facts that students should be made aware of. First, many early-nineteenth-century laborers were not content with traditional tales that "round the mountains hung." Much as they may have valued these tales, they also recognized a connection between a lack of formal education and a lack of political power. Second, as the proliferation of laboring-class autobiographies in the nineteenth century makes clear, England's newly literate laboring-class majority shaped their culture by writing new material as well as by reading and speaking traditional stories.

Students can also be made aware that Wordsworth follows Romantic-period literary convention in choosing not to describe the physical struggles of poverty. He notes that the Wanderer's childhood home was "exceeding poor" (line 128) but focuses on the spiritual purity that he claims this forced asceticism produced rather than on the physical depravation it must have caused. "Pure livers were they all," he writes, "austere and grave, / And fearing God" (129–30). Thomson does not hesitate to describe the trials of hunger and cold that he and his family undergo. He also details for readers the living conditions of their laboring countrymen, who suffer as a "hungry, over-wrought, hovel-huddled, ill-clad, straw-bedded slave class" (9). Reading Thomson's *Autobiography* alongside Wordsworth unveils the politics of the poet's silence about the struggles of the rural poor. But this silence results, at least in part, from a historical shift in the literary portrayal of poverty that took place between 1814, when *The Excursion* was first published, and 1848, when Thomson's *Autobiography of*

an Artisan was published. Thomson's detailed portrayal of hunger and poor housing participates in the broader efforts to criticize society through literature. While many laboring authors describe the poverty that Burnett characterizes as "brutal, degrading, and almost unimaginable" (*Useful Toil* xiv), as though it were inevitable, Thomson joins more canonical condition-of-England authors in condemning such poverty as the symptom of unhealthy political and moral systems. In addition to highlighting the differences between the representation of laborers and self-representation by them, his autobiography can highlight for students the ways that the portrayal of laboring-class lives changed after Chartism and the Hungry Forties. Such a comparison helps students understand the effects of industrial change and the Corn Laws—historical realities that can seem more like bullet points to memorize for an exam than shaping influences on the lives of most of the period's citizens.

Thomson's autobiography overlaps with *The Excursion* thematically and stylistically as well as in the tale it tells. Both works wander from narrative into philosophy, even into ethnography, and both encompass contradictions, even going so far as to thematize their own lack of unity. But the texts prepare us to experience our wandering reading differently: Wordsworth entreats us to extract a system from *The Excursion*, thereby placing the burden of creating this unified system on readers; Thomson, like Wordsworth, refrains from unifying his portrayal of an intinerant life. Yet his resistance to the expectation that a story of working-class life should progress toward professional respectability seems more politically poignant. Wordsworth, relying on readers' ability to create a meaningful unity out of their reading excursion, reinforces their freedom. Wandering, in thought or body, ends up being a choice that we can make for pleasure before returning to our snug homes—both the snug physical homes we would certainly have if we could pay the forty-two-shilling price of *The Excursion* in 1814 (St. Clair 200) and the snug mental activity of contemplating a poem's quality and implications. The digressiveness of Thomson's text seems less an invitation for readers to extract a philosophical system and more a simple reflection of the unstable life the author had to lead. Throughout, readers are vividly shown the physical deprivations and emotional uncertainties of economically enforced wandering. For both works, the d[illegible] can use the formal wandering away from narrative to question the boundaries of literature in the period. Wordsworth and Thomson exercise a freedom from generic boundaries that Keen suggests is typical for the Romantic period (*Crisis* 3).

In addition to inviting students to consider the political implications of the digressive form of *The Excursion* and *The Autobiography*, instructors can direct students to examine the books' paratextual elements. As Alison Hickey and Lisa Hirschfield have both noted, Wordsworth's use of wandering structure in the poem reenacts his failure to arrive at a memory that has the unity of a representative place or a representative story (Hickey 14; Hirschfield 3). The poet-narrator presents characters engaging in the act of memory but seems unable to tie these multivoiced memories together in any way but by wandering through them. Advanced students reading the complete *Excursion* and *Autobiography* can write about their agreement or disagreement with this interpretation and analyze the ways that the books' paratextual elements influence their interpretation. In his dedicatory sonnet to the earl of Lonsdale, Wordsworth hopes that the poem will "prove a monument" (line 7), This implies that a monumental unity will be achieved, but because the proving ground is projected into the future, it must be the readers who construct that unity. Wordsworth's analogy between his life's work in poetry and a cathedral similarly implies that readers will be able to assemble a unified architecture for themselves. Most explicitly, Wordsworth informs us in his preface to the 1814 edition of *The Excursion*, "It is not the Author's intention formally to announce a system. . . . [I]f he shall succeed in conveying to the mind clear thoughts, lively images, and strong feelings, the Reader will have no difficulty in extracting the system for himself" (x). The isuggesstion is that readers experience the poem's narrative and generic wandering as onlookers while the five characters move about in an imagined poetic cartography. Readers can, through their identification with the Wanderer, immerse themselves in the poem's cartography and wander imaginatively through the experiences described. Butultimately the paratextual apparatus of *The Excursion*, particularly the 1814 edition, which includes the cathedral metaphor and the instructions for the reader's "extracting the system for himself," privileges a more distanced reading technique. The poem may invite readerly excurses into different perspectives, different histories, different visions of the land, but like the Wanderer himself settling into a home, readers are enjoined to build a system of thought in which to take up permanent residence.

Whereas Wordsworth's paratextual apparatus prepares us for the freedom of making sense and systems out of people's working-class experience, the paratextual apparatus in Thomson's *Autobiography of an Artisan* prepares us to see the book's wandering form and the literal wandering it

attempts to describe as unavoidable economic consequences. In his preface, Thomson explains:

> [T]he Author has been compelled to write his "Autobiography" at various times, and frequently during the hours snatched from labour, or stolen from the few hours allowed to the Artisan for rest and leisure. With a family of seven children around him—some of them young ones—their merry laugh, and sometimes tearless cries, have been the constant companions of his pen. (vii)

Whether the lack of unity in the *Autobiography* is intentional or not, the preface prepares us to read Thomson's sudden shifts of voice and subject as the consequence of a noisy, busy life. In the book's first chapter, Thomson urges the reader to "[g]ive the artisans and peasantry food, and . . . occasional leisure to wander in the fields and lanes" (9), but the narrative that follows reminds us that most of his wandering was not for leisure but to find work.

After being apprenticed to a shipwright, the twenty-year-old Thomson cannot find work, so he accepts a position on a whaling ship bound for Greenland despite "severe sea sickness" (122). Later, after he has married and begun a family, he travels with a troupe of strolling players as a scenery painter. He even joins a circus for a time. Readers of Dickens's *Hard Times* may be disappointed to find the circus associated with hard work and dishonor rather than freedom and fancy (Thomson 237–38). Thomson does not restrict himself to narrating his intellectual and moral life; he also describes the "breadless breakfasts and meatless dinners" endured by him and his family during their itinerancy (249). We are not asked to keep the text at a distance and contemplate its moral system. If Thomson points our attention away from his own experience of itinerant poverty, he directs us not to processes of memory or ways of reading but to other working-class families who, had we been contemporary readers, would have been our near neighbors.

Much as we want to teach these texts in order to help students see working-class people of the Romantic period as subjects involved in their own literary representation rather than the mere objects of leisure-class authorial reflection, it can be difficult to find the time. *The Excursion* and *The Autobiography of an Artisan* are both around four hundred pages long. An alternative to teaching these works in their entirety is to incorporate Thomson's preface and first chapter, about thirty pages, into an existing syllabus. They contain an overview of his life and a statement

about the importance of reading about working-class lives. They could be used to discuss the continuing absence of working-class autobiography in the canon, to question Wordsworth's claim in the preface to *Lyrical Ballads* that "the essential passions of the heart" are "under less restraint" in "humble and rustic" life (Wordsworth and Coleridge 156), to understand the obstacles facing working-class authors, and to analyze the relation between economy and culture as the search for work sent workers like Thomson away from their home communities. If the preface and first chapter of Thomson's *Autobiography* are taught alongside the preface and book 1 of *The Excursion*, classes could also analyze the uses of paratext in the period, compare the implications of Wordsworth's and Thomson's formal innovations, and compare the self-representation of a working-class person with the better-known representation of that person by a leisure-class spokesman. Other working-class autobiographies could be used as well. Instructors teaching John Clare's poems could have students read his "Sketches in the Life of John Clare," now available in *John Clare by Himself*. Those who address industrialization could include Robert Blincoe's narrative, published by radical journalist Richard Carlile and now available in *Factory Lives* (Simmons 87–179).

Fact and fiction form, of course, a false dichotomy: neither ever escapes from the other. Working-class autobiography, like any other form of literature, derives much of its interest from its constructedness as a literary text. The dichotomy between Wordsworth and Thomson is false as well. Wordsworth's portrayal of poor people is more abstracted from material history than Thomson's, but this difference is a product of changing literary conventions as well as the authors' very different personal experience. Wordsworth's portrayal of poor people, especially the itinerant poor, is radical in comparison with earlier portrayals of poor people by Cowper and Crabbe. Gary Harrison rightly argues that it would be unfair "to ask [Wordsworth] to be a prophetic visionary who . . . escapes wholly the ideological limitations of his . . . time" (52). Some of the Goody Blakes and Simon Lees of the period never got to describe their lives in their own terms, and Wordsworth's attempt to imagine their lives and voices honors them. But some workers did speak for themselves. Our next generation of Romanticists should listen to them.

Note

1. Wordsworth makes a plea for working-class education later in the poem but places it in the voice of the Pastor (book 9, lines 292–308).