

«Move along these shades in gentleness of heart»: William Wordsworth, Ecological Empathy, and a Reading of “Nutting”

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to investigate William Wordsworth’s poetics by employing an ecocritical lens that gives due consideration to a complex of significant elements and factors, from the author’s mental growth and proto-ecological awareness to his place-rooted imagination and environmental commitment. Space is devoted to an analysis of Wordsworth’s intimate connection with the Lake District, as well as to pertinent qualities of his Nature poetry, with a careful eye toward landmark studies in Literary Ecology and how they have assessed the Romantic artist’s intellectual and creative production. A close reading of “Nutting”, a short but emblematic narrative poem published in the second edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), will bring these aspects to light with powerful allegorical resonance. The reading will also facilitate reflection on human/non-human interactions, a state of holistic and healthy cohabitation, eco-caring practices, and the awakening of an ecospiritual consciousness.

Keywords

William Wordsworth, “Nutting”, Nature poetry, The Lake District, Environmental conservation, Ecospirituality, Metabiological relationality.

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William Wordsworth between localism and globality

A British epitome of the Romantic "Poet of Nature" and an authoritative, knowledgeable spokesman for the pristine beauty of his place of origin, namely the Lake District of nineteenth-century Cumberland and Westmorland, William Wordsworth (1770-1850) has hardly ever ceased to be recognised as an influential figure in literary history, all the more so as we now see him virtually (and safely) navigate the various waves of ecocritical scholarship. In connection with the increased environmental awareness of our age and a theoretical orientation that has paved the way for an alternatively light, dark, or bright greening of the humanities, Wordsworth has often come to the forefront in the realm of cultural debates and critical discourse.

However, even before considering critical trends, socio-political reasons, or the literary canon itself – the author's role as spiritual leader for the first generation of Romantic poets and his being named Poet Laureate in 1843, a title he would retain for life – one might contend that contributing to Wordsworth's lasting impact nowadays is his entrenched, unflinchingly sympathetic attitude towards the natural world: the capitalisation of «the joy and pleasure he receive[d] from an affective experience» linked to the sacralised beauty of that world (Ottum - Reno 2016: 1). Importantly, loving Nature also offered him «an essential element to thinking critically about the environment», an opportunity to embrace an ecological view infused with a «yearning for interconnection» (*ibid.*: 1-2)¹. From this perspective,

¹ As the authors underline in their Introduction to the volume, the search for a recovery of the true «emotion of Romantic environmentalism» is inextricably linked to «consider[ing] love of nature not as hopelessly naïve or escapist but

such a yearning for reciprocity and intersubjective solidarity would counterbalance the enclosed mental circuitry of self-reflection and, in a meta-literary sense, invite us to reassess a longstanding tenet in Wordsworth's orthodox critical reception. Strictly speaking, the commonly accepted thesis that has been giving prominence to the author's self-absorbed, would-be compulsive concentration on the processes of his own mind.

If not totally set aside, the portrayal of a «narcissistic Wordsworth» committed to conveying «not the thing itself, but only his ideas about it», with a frequent slipping into the long-winded abstractions of the pathetic fallacy (Klein 2019: 105-106), is currently being overshadowed by the characterisation of a poet who does anything but shrink from the materiality of the non-human domain. Indeed, Wordsworth's earnest cultivation of natural piety and emotional receptivity, his statement that «man and nature [are] essentially adapted to each other», and the value he assigned to the mind's «state of enjoyment» (Wordsworth [1800] 1910: 281, 287), induce one to speak of a kind of *embodied* response to a thriving nexus of human and non-human correlations. To use a more familiar lexicon, Wordsworth's organicist, anti-mechanistic conception of Nature and «awareness of the underlying unity of all things» (Robinson 2010: 41) seem to approximate present-time notions of “ecological kinship”, i.e. the perception of a dynamic, porous network of cross-species affiliations.

Taking a cue from Kate Rigby's illuminating historical analysis of the Schlegelian concept of 'Sympoesie' and the motifs of shared authorship, potentiation and creative collaboration (Rigby 2023), but reversing the diachronic route in order to focus on how this term has recently been revived in the fields of Posthuman studies and biological sciences, we soon come across the trope of life forms' mutual entanglements and complex patterning. Specific reference should be made here to Donna J. Haraway's commentary in *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, a brilliant and provocative study endeavouring to figure out new constructive ways to tackle living on a damaged Earth in our impressively stratified geological era. This is how the American philosopher and multispecies theorist opens Chapter 3, dedicated to the topic of sympoiesis:

Sympoiesis is a simple word; it means “making-with.” Nothing makes

as generative of ecological thinking» (Ottum - Reno 2016: 2). Their collection of essays thus establishes a dialogue between Ecocriticism and the recent affective turn in the humanities.

itself; nothing is really autopoietic or self-organizing. [...] *Sympoiesis* is a word proper to complex, dynamic, responsive, situated, historical systems. It is a word for worlding-with, in company. *Sympoiesis* enfolds autopoiesis and generatively unfurls and extends it. (Haraway 2016: 58)

While allowing for the epistemic cleavage separating the nineteenth century from the third millennium, it can be argued that Haraway's emphasis on an overdue proclivity for «making-with» – and, implicitly, “becoming-with” – calls attention to a process of vital interlockings and attuned adaptations to which Wordsworth was certainly sensitive. As a matter of fact, his «ecological love» was capable of breaking down «the human-nature binary both philosophically and scientifically» (Reno 2016: 46) and, well before the superimposition of hisedulcorated Victorian version as a benevolent “Priest of Nature”, minister of truth and soothing dispenser of wisdom, his professed love of nature did amount to a «political act that communicate[d] a range of social and ideological positions» (*ibid.*: 28), not least the ideals of liberty and equality associated with the French and American Revolutions.

Wordsworth's poetics, therefore, would lend itself to a reading that draws on both the phenomenology of “*sympoiesis*” and a convergence towards “*symbiosis*”. That is to say, a reading that takes account of the manifestation and strengthening of symbiotic-like interactions which strike one as mutualistic, having human and non-human parties contribute to each other's subsistence in keeping with a paradigm of harmonious cohabitation. When approaching Wordsworth through this green lens, his attachment to place and the priority he accorded to real-life settings visibly take centre stage. The employment of ‘localism’ in the present paper points exactly to the intrinsic value and relevance of such a situated syntax of dwelling, a trait that has been repeatedly highlighted in Wordsworth studies across the decades.

In this context, it is worthwhile recalling two pioneering contributions from the 1970s, a period significantly coinciding with the embryonic phase of Ecocriticism. Although he never disavowed his postulation hinging on Wordsworth's self-reflective consciousness and a visionary/apocalyptic imagination that would impair any symmetrical interdependence between Man and Nature, Geoffrey Hartman did not belittle the author's «obsession with place». In his 1971 appendage to *Wordsworth's Poetry: 1787-1814*, he appealed in fact to nothing less than an *omphalos*, a numinous «secret or sacred “spot” on which nature seemed to converge» within Wordsworth's

mindscape framework (Hartman 1971: XII-XIII). The other contribution is by Karl Kroeber, who, when affirming that Nature is to Wordsworth «what we now call an ecological unity» (Kroeber 1974: 132), located himself squarely in the ecocritical terrain he was to probe deeply in the 1990s. Kroeber clearly stated that Wordsworth «foreshadow[ed] late twentieth-century conservation» and that he set about celebrating «a “region,” a complexly interdependent, self-sufficient “place”» (*ibid.*). Captivatingly, Kroeber went so far as to claim that the author’s flowing discursive «style in poetic meditation is possible because it is rooted to a single, fixed place» (*ibid.*: 133)².

As to the reception of Wordsworth as a Nature poet in a transnational and globalised sphere, the frame of reference is predictably wide and nuanced, depending on chronology, geocultural backdrops, and canons. To begin tapping into this, one can follow the well-trodden path unfolding through the cultural fabric of the Romantic movement itself (and its reverberations in the long nineteenth century), especially when it comes to its rich panoply of archetypes and symbolical imagery, theoretical principles and ideologies pertaining to transcendence. Within that horizon, it is the parable of philosophical/psychological insight achieved *through* a communion with Nature that is generally pushed to the fore in Wordsworth’s verse, together with his human-centred scrutinising mind, didactic undertones, and diffuse recollections gathering around a cluster of momentous “spots of time”. Traditionally, the poignant, moving or sublime encounters with the natural element have been seen as conducive to a higher spiritual dimension, be it moral, metaphysical or pantheistic. As a consequence, Wordsworth’s treasuring of specific, geographically grounded sites has been somewhat superseded in favour of a more universalised, holistic scenario elevating itself far beyond the English shores.

This said, there is however a concomitant factor that deserves mentioning in connection with Wordsworth’s contemporary transnational image, and that is the number of challenging appropriations, cross-cultural interpretations, and socio-politically charged retellings of his most famous poems primarily by authors born in, or genealogically tied to,

² Kroeber’s following gloss further testifies to his far-sighted, ecologically-oriented inquiry: «This is, in effect, Wordsworth’s vision: no return to primitivism, but, instead, full utilization of trained consciousness so as to *fit better into the unified interdependence* that is nature [...] a unity in which place and self are *mutually defining*» (Kroeber 1974: 137; my italics).

former colonies of the British Empire. One of the most thought-provoking studies in this field is Katherine Bergren's *Global Wordsworth: Romanticism Out of Place*, which sets out to investigate such "repurposings" by expanding on J.M. Coetzee's portrayal of post-apartheid South Africa, Antigua-born Jamaica Kincaid's gardening activities in Vermont, and abolitionist Lydia Maria Child's contentions for socio-egalitarian progress in nineteenth-century America. Teasingly starting her reflections with a nod to the notorious cultural impact that, particularly among Caribbean writers, had stemmed from the daffodils' mystique in the relentlessly memorised "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud", Bergren prompts us to ponder on the age-old intermingling between culture and imperialism, identity and power, and the ways the "seeds of Englishness" sown in colonial territories would progressively lead to the emulation, mimicry, critical resistance to, deconstruction or utter rejection of a foreign metropolitan inheritance amidst native authors, as Postcolonial studies have eloquently shown to this day. More interestingly for our argumentation, Bergren also singles out a peculiar feature of Wordsworth's reception worldwide, registering his «relative absence from the global turn in Romantic studies» and noting how, as «Romanticism has expanded to analyze contexts beyond England, Wordsworth has been more a counterexample than an illustration of the era's global entanglements» (Bergren 2019: 3).

Differently put, in the face of his «poetry's global travels» (*ibid.*) and notwithstanding the commodification and myriad «afterlives of [his] daffodils» (*ibid.*: 9), Wordsworth's *oeuvre* has never been completely stripped of a distinctively national, experiential imprint embedded in the Lake District. When dealing with the context of postcolonial and World Literature, his Nature writing is often cast in unison with a condition-of-England axiology. Should we look for a fitting category, Wordsworth's influence might be defined as *glocal* at best, with a discrete, regionally-inflected ingredient constituting an unshakable cornerstone of his literary edifice.

In sum, quite paradoxically, Wordsworth's localism – at least the one informing the 1797-1807 climactic decade – proves an inbred quality of the author's acquired cultural capital and marketable iconography on a global scale. And this brings us back to the subject of his place-bound ecological sensibility, into which the following paragraph will take an additional detour. The remainder of the article will finally concentrate on a close reading of "Nutting".

Wordsworth's ecological sensibility

No apprehension of Wordsworth's conception of Nature as a sacred, vibrant ontological entity would be possible without letting his own life circumstances enter the picture. There is little doubt that his works and (eco-) poetic imagery would have been different had he not spent the years of his childhood, boyhood, and maturity among the lake-strewn valleys and fells of the Lake District area. Standing as striking proof of this are not only the recursive settings and topographical realness of his poems (although he can be seen to have gradually extended his conceptual compass), but also the colourful spectrum of moods, states of mind, feelings and atmospheres that permeate his lines and are manifestly sparked by that *genius loci*.

Now a leading tourist destination, national park and UNESCO World Heritage Site in the county of Cumbria, the Lake District is remarkable for its unique, scenic combination of England's main lakes, forests and highest mountains, consisting of a rocky core of over two hundred peaks broken up into blocks by glacier-carved valleys. It is no wonder that this green natural enclave, especially as one thinks of its older, wild geographic traits, would be instrumental in shaping the author's sensibility, mindscape and, as it were, bioregional focus. His instinctive aversion for life indoors, his passion for wandering and immersing himself in the countryside and woodlands, can be said to have found their wellspring in this self-unified habitat and its fascinating geological history.

With their low population density, agricultural and pastoral economy and stunning variety of wildlife, the Lakes made a lasting impression on Wordsworth's watchful receptivity and sensitive temper, to such an extent that he ended by regarding those surroundings as both a model of healthy frugal life and a verdant corner of paradise, a synecdoche for God's signature opening a window into revealed truths. With hindsight, one would not hesitate to describe that territory on the northwest coast of England as a self-sufficing ecosystem, a secluded "commonwealth" undergirded by a praxis of sustainable livelihood and, in the years to come, capable of supporting rare and endangered native species. Furthermore, building on the helpful glimpses provided by Norman Lacey back in the 1940s, one is struck by the workable comparability of Wordsworth's place-based intuitions (and beliefs) with some of the founding principles in ecology and land ethic. For example, the author's conviction about the existence of an intelligent Life Force fostering «a healthy state of integration» (Lacey [1948] 2013: 13) might be set side by side with the postulate of biological homeostasis and the dynamic balance interconnecting biotic and abiotic factors in

the ecosphere. This synergistic conjunction of resilience and adjustment to variables would in fact ensure the stabilisation of ecosystems as self-regulating, coordinated wholes. Such an integrity should consequently be preserved against the hazardous encroachment of conquering and purely exploiting drives on the human part. Wordsworth also held that, if one in spirit, Nature is «manifold in form» (*ibid.*), which reminds us of biodiversity, or co-evolving diversity, within a given environment.

Touching now on just a few relevant details of Wordsworth's life – a trajectory he famously reconstructed in tandem with his poetic vocation throughout the stages of composition of his unfinished autobiographical poem *The Prelude or, Growth of a Poet's Mind* (1799, 1805, 1850) – it should be recalled that he was born on 7 April 1770 at Cockermouth, a small town on Lakeland's northern edge³. The actual place of his birth was a fine two-storied mansion «whose garden was bordered by the "alder shades and rocky falls" of the River Derwent» where, as a child, he would happily enjoy summer bathing (Gill [1989] 2020: 3), besides roaming over fields and scrambling up rocks. Parts of that garden and the playground nearby the ruins of the town's castle remained «magical terrains in the memory of the poet as late as his seventy-third year» (*ibid.*: 4).

The second son of John Wordsworth and Ann Cookson, William found himself coping with an early blow when his mother died of pneumonia in 1778, a loss made worse by the fact that his father had to rely on Ann's relatives in Penrith and other districts in England for the custody of his five children. Hence the poet's forced, painful separation from the Cockermouth household, especially his beloved sister Dorothy, whom he would not see again for a nine-year span. The premature passing away of John Wordsworth, in 1783, rubbed further salt in the wound, in a grim overlapping of bereavement and financial strain, since Tory baronet and wealthy landowner Sir James Lowther, future 1st Earl of Lonsdale, by whom John had been employed as a law-agent, callously refused to reimburse the expenses that the solicitor had paid for in advance for administering his affairs. Left an orphan, William passed into the care of his uncles, with whom he had very few affinities.

Attenuating his grief, however, were the eight years (1779-1787) he spent at Hawkshead Grammar School, a highly qualified institution in

³ Wordsworth's life has been comprehensively investigated, from varying critical perspectives, by a vast number of biographers. For my concise overview, I have drawn on Gill [1989] 2020, Worthen 2014, and Bate 2020.

Lancashire (now Cumbria) chosen by his father with the aim of suitably preparing him for the Cambridge curriculum. Nested in the heart of the Lake District, this school's breathtaking location restored the boy's spirit, infused him with inner strength, and quickened his sensitivity. As he would make clear in his recollections, those formative years were such not just in terms of bookish knowledge, but by dint of his education in the eye of Nature, which nourished his imaginative faculty and eventually turned into a source of spiritual blessing and a moral guardian of his heart. In various ways, the genes of the "quintessential Wordsworth" are encoded in this lapse of time, during which he heightened his inclination to converse with, and take intense delight in, natural beauty.

Scores of episodes, thrilling sensations and emotional responses remained enshrined in his memory from the Hawkshead years, such as the walks through the five-mile route around Esthwaite Water and into the dear spots of its Eden-like vale, which he was to extoll in his early poem *The Vale of Esthwaite* (1787) and one of whose woodland patches would crucially inspire "Nutting", as we will see. There were daily saunters in adjacent areas brimming with vegetable and animal life, fertile soil and water, where he and his schoolmates could engage in their boyish pursuits, from fishing to snaring, from birds-nesting to catching woodcocks and collecting nuts, including occasional nocturnal outings. For that matter, the Hawkshead establishment allowed for a viable meld of study sessions and invigorating physical activity, so that pupils had the chance to try their hand at climbing, rowing, swimming, and skating across the lake.

Nonetheless, these physical exertions and escapades were rarely confined to the sheer pleasure of playing in the open and blowing off steam. It was in fact at this point in time that Wordsworth began to court the idea of dedicating himself to poetry and that he happened to get a foretaste of the majestic, potentially frightening attributes of Nature, whose awe-inspiring grandeur proved capable of alternatively comforting and intimidating, enlarging and «purif[ying] the feelings by beauty and by fear» (Lacey [1948] 2013: 16). As testified by an often-cited sequence of epiphanic passages in *The Prelude*, the author did not fail to elaborate on the incidents that saw «his younger self behaving badly» (Worthen 2014: 2) in defiance of a *natura naturans* suffused with divine immanence. In the aftermath of a transgression or an abuse of power, the adolescent Wordsworth would feel enwrapped in a gloomy, uncanny aura of reprisal originating from a natural Will that was seemingly harsh in judging infraction and gratuitous defilement. This atmospheric and eerily wordless – but all the more pregnant – upbraiding of the boy's "animal appetites" resulted in a piercing sense of regret and

an awakening of conscience that left an indelible mark on the adult's ethical and psychological make-up. As Adam Potkay appropriately observes, with reference to the exploits recounted in *The Prelude*:

Reviewing his childhood, the poet regains trust that nature can teach by accidents (1805 *Prelude*, Books I, II, V, XI-XII) [...]. The main moments of growing up [...] involve the fear and regret (and perhaps masochistic pleasure) the boy feels in seizing birds' eggs, stealing trapped pheasants, and using someone's rowboat without permission. In all these incidents, sublime elements of the environment either rise up (a craggy steep) or foreground themselves (loud winds, 'low breathings' (l. 330)) *as if* chastening the errant boy. (Potkay 2015: 689)

To cut a long story short, the Hawkshead years cemented Wordsworth's symbiotic connection with an environment that was for him synonymous with 'home', and where he actually lived from his birth to age 17, and then again from when he was 29 until his death. If the acquaintance with the Lakes positioned him on the road towards ecological empathy – a readiness to understand, share and *feel with* other sentient beings and organisms, along with the adoption of a respectful behaviour under the auspices of Nature – other stays in more urbanised settlements either woefully obstructed the emergence of this *Einfühlung*, or filled him with nostalgia for his native country. Suffice it to think of his attendance at St. John's College in Cambridge (1787-1791), where he grew disenchanted with the competitive examinations and rivalries for academic distinction, to say nothing of the four months he spent in London in 1791, where, in his eyes, the metropolitan agglomerations only succeeded in exacerbating isolation and estrangement. With the notable exception of the European walking tour he organised in the summer of 1790 with fellow-student Robert Jones – a 3000-mile trek through France, Switzerland and Northern Italy, a litmus test of his keenness for a nature-oriented lifestyle – Wordsworth's sojourns beyond the borders of the English countryside never struck a profoundly responsive chord (not even his subsequent travels on the Continent in the 1820s and 1830s). After the somewhat frantic parenthesis relating to his second journey in revolutionary France and the liaison with Annette Vallon (1791-1792), he might be said to have found the right path when, in 1795, he was finally reunited with his sister Dorothy and moved with her to Dorset and Somerset, laying the groundwork for his friendly and artistically fruitful relationship with S.T. Coleridge.

The turning-point year was 1799, when Wordsworth and Dorothy

resettled in the Lake District. A few years later, in 1802, the poet was to marry Mary Hutchinson and start a family there. Town End, Allan Bank, and Rydal – the hamlets where they lived – were all part of the historic county of Westmorland and lay in the proximity of the cherished Grasmere village, in whose churchyard Wordsworth was buried in 1850. To quote again from Kroeber, one can assert that the «perfect spherical enclosure» of the Grasmere vale, as eulogistically hailed in “Home at Grasmere” (1800-1803), objectified for the author «the possibility of a wholeness of life, a joining of the psychic with the physical, of past with future in the present» (Kroeber 1974: 134).

This circular process of “re-earthing” culminating in a consecration of the values of rootedness, continuity – quite significantly, the first time Wordsworth had a glimpse of Grasmere was when hiking as a Hawkshead schoolboy – and of a joyful vision of unity has been interpreted from different angles. Distinguishing between two key approaches, one trend appears to look back on the Keatsian notion of «the [W]ordsworthian or egotistical sublime» (John Keats, Letter to Richard Woodhouse, 27 October 1818, qtd. in Klein 2019: 105), while the other emphasises the “connected state” of the author’s self with the green *oikos* and his genuine concern about nature-loss.

In the former case, Wordsworth’s bioregional penchant is generally curtailed in terms of insularity, parochialism and nostalgic conservatism (or geographic “museumification”), as though the poet allegorically became one with his literary figure of The Solitary in *The Excursion* (1814), or with the eponymous protagonist of the unfinished *The Recluse*, living in retirement and indulging in quietistic meditations amidst remote valleys and mountains. Among present-day contributions, Scott Hess’s *William Wordsworth and the Ecology of Authorship: The Roots of Environmentalism in Nineteenth-Century Culture* is a prominent case in point. In Hess’s view, Wordsworthian thinking should be duly appraised within its delimited epistemological frame, pivoting on the beliefs and discernment of an “educated bard” intent on preaching his own (lofty) gospel of nature-worship. The star on the scene is here invariably the male sightseer lost in rapt contemplation, an «autonomous subjectivity» (Hess 2012: 23) detached from the turmoil of society and self-servingly «appropriat[ing] landscapes from the outside» (211) or, rather, from the *inner sanctum* of Lakeland.

As might be expected, the line of reasoning followed in the present article is less in consonance with Hess – who frames Wordsworth’s elitist isolation and aesthetic consumption negatively in contrast with the inclusive policies of a community ecology – and much more in agreement with the

second critical approach, epitomised by Jonathan Bate's seminal *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition*. Blazing a trail in the intersecting pathways between British Romanticism and ecological thought, Bate's survey can hardly be overestimated and needs at this stage little to no introduction⁴. Nevertheless, it must be underlined how his «green reading of Wordsworth» (Bate 1991: 9) persuasively places weight not only on the intertwining between conservationist attitudes and Romantic concerns, but also on a philosophy of re-earthing that fully endorses environmental action, as declared in the following passage:

In sharp contrast to the so-called 'Romantic Ideology', the Romantic ecology has nothing to do with flight from the material world, from history and society – it is in fact an attempt to enable mankind the better to live in the material world by entering into harmony with the environment. (40)

Under the apparently simplistic equating of an ecological viewpoint with a sense of respect for the Earth that should go hand in hand with a salutary relativisation of capitalist economy, Bate ushers in overarching issues such as unalienated labour and sustainable resource management. As for Wordsworth, Bate's lucid critique encourages us to retrace the political implications of the poet's rendering of the pastoral genre's *locus amoenus* not as a luxuriant «pre-lapsarian Eden», but as a «*working paradise*» (22): a rural community happy in itself, reminiscent of a self-governing republic keying on substantial needs. The accent is put on Wordsworth's historical identity as a dweller whose localised «namings speak of assimilation. The subjection is that of the man to the place» (102).

In the upshot, Wordsworth's allegedly self-complacent and idle faith in Nature is here supplanted by the "muscular" countenance of the Northern Borderer from the Lakes who vocally strove to maintain inter-generational bonds and conserve wilderness against both privatisation and technological advancements. A confirmation of this was his adamant opposition to the enclosure of wastelands and commons and, notoriously, his fervid public plea against the construction of the Kendal and Windermere Railway in the mid-1840s. If not literally a manifesto, Wordsworth's

⁴ Tellingly, among the critical sources I have dialogued with in this article, Hall 2014, Ottum - Reno 2016, and Dale - Yen 2022 palpably tie in with Bate's criteria of ecocritical assessment.

best-selling *Guide to the Lakes* (especially in its expanded 1835 version) adds mill to Bate's grist, since it memorably marshalled arguments in favour of the safeguarding of the region's natural scenery and its finely integrated cottage architecture. Native plants, too, were upheld to the detriment of exogenous species and fashionable "exotics". Indeed, the poet's inveighing against the speciousness of ornamental gardening, or the unbecomingness of the larch plantations that regrettably jeopardised Lakeland's flora, has survived the test of time up to our days.

This last reference offers us an entering wedge to introduce the theme of the conservationist's heartfelt involvement with trees, parklands and gardening. Wordsworth was in fact «celebrated and frequently consulted as something of a garden guru, characteristically pressing his opinions upon people – landowners, gardeners, visitors» (Dale - Yen 2022: 129). As an indicative preamble to our analysis of "Nutting", one ought to bear in mind the author's bent for translating (personal, cultural, political, religious) meanings via arboreal terms or shapes even in everyday conversation, as though looking towards a green ecolect⁵.

Ecospiritual intimations in "Nutting"

Starting from the theoretical premise of humankind's enduring psycho-emotional bonds with plants, this paper section aims to cast light on the allegorical amplification of this motif in "Nutting". One of Wordsworth's blank-verse fragments inspired by recollections from his boyhood, this piece was first published in the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads, with Other Poems* (1800) among the "Poems of the Imagination".

It is a known fact that our bonds with vegetation and flora reach back

⁵ Peter Dale and Brandon C. Yen's trendsetting book contains much carefully selected evidence on Wordsworth's environmental observance and rudiments of dendrology (encompassing the royal oak, ash trees, yews, hawthorns, and firs, from Great Britain to Ireland and continental Europe). As they put it: «Like Coleridge's, Wordsworth's explorations of natural history may not have been systematic, but his practical interest led him to *close botanical observations*, often supported by scientific knowledge. Although he was always wary of "microscopic views" because they could sacrifice the "exactness of a comprehensive mind", he had a botanical microscope and books on botany and corresponded with scientists, as well as gardeners and nurserymen [...]. *That Wordsworth, with his own respect for trees, was a trailblazer* is both extraordinary and profoundly encouraging» (Dale - Yen 2022: 9; my italics).

into time-hallowed cultural, philosophical, religious traditions and innumerable anthropological practices. In more recent times, an additional component has gathered momentum, probing into the scientifically acknowledged forms of non-neural intelligence that distinguish vegetable organisms in their capacity to sense and respond to the environment, forge communicative networks through chemical and other signals, allocate resources or acclimatise themselves. If, as one would expect, the hermeneutic tools of phytosemiotics cannot but exceed the boundaries of Wordsworth's text, the principle of a metabiological relationality appears nonetheless to shape the semantic and symbolic palimpsest of "Nutting". In this lyrical narrative poem, as we will shortly observe, a thriving clump of hazel trees is recklessly disfigured and fruit-stripped by human hands. In the wake of this cruel spoiling, the arboreal victims softly send out "morphological signals" until their defaced features trigger a process of touching, empathic identification in the (faulty, remorseful) agent responsible for the deed of vandalism.

The animistic pulsations emanating from the green bower and trees, as well as from a magically ensouled sky, both gesture towards their inherent ontological value and apparently strive to convey ecospiritual intimations. As it happens, they issue a silent, nonverbal warning about their inviolable and constitutional connection to an ecosystemic constellation where mankind is an integral part but does not wear the crown, as if traversing a galaxy of bioforms that is ultimately beyond its intellectual grasp. This explains why, about thirty years ago, David Joplin had already delved beneath the fairy-story surface of "Nutting" to detect in it «a strain of "deep ecology" that recognizes a biocentric world in which man and nature are spiritually equals» (Joplin 1997: 18) and endowed with the same intrinsic worth. The sudden burst of rapaciousness from the I's younger self in the poem would then appear all the more iniquitous if associated with an insane attempt to «eradicat[e] the "otherness" of nature through an act of destructive usurpation» (Tong 2005: 105).

With its cautionary-tale ciphers, "Nutting" thus condenses, as though in a *nutshell*, Wordsworth's idea of Nature as a spiritually immanent force and a Moral Teacher in whose lessons ecstatic pleasure and chilling premonitions can seamlessly coalesce. It also bears witness to the author's intuitions concerning the permeable thresholds of the "web of life", where the line between human and non-human agency, or intentionality, may well be hard to draw. Likewise, the poem resonates vividly with the aesthetic manifesto penned in the 1800 Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, from the choice of common-life incidents and their presentation «in an unusual aspect» (Wordsworth [1800] 1910: 271) to the notion of the poet's «more lively sen-

sibility, [...] more comprehensive soul» (278), capable of coming to grips with «an infinite complexity of pain and pleasure» (280).

A few details relating to the poem's genesis will give us a better idea of the intense feelings that the author was to restore and transfigure into it, in concert with his growth in moral awareness and imaginative conception. Interestingly, "Nutting" was not composed in England, but during Wordsworth's stay in Germany, in the company of Dorothy and Coleridge. While the latter was galvanised by the vibrant intellectual climate of Hamburg and Ratzeburg, Wordsworth had to grapple with limited financial resources and eventually settled with his sister in the less cosmopolitan Goslar. In that town, he felt lonely, suffering pangs of homesickness that crept into his mind and tinged it with a touch of melancholy. It was at this juncture that, in the winter of 1798-1799, he began to work on early drafts of *The Prelude*, the plaintive *Lucy Poems* and "Nutting" itself, among other pieces. Originally intended as part of his long autobiographical poem in the making, "Nutting" was later omitted and included in Volume II of the 1800 edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*⁶.

In a letter she sent to Coleridge in December 1798, Dorothy transcribed the fragment's lines and spoke of them as «a nutting scene ... laid in the North of England» (qtd. in Righetti 2016: 191). More corroborating evidence was provided by her brother, who, in the 1843 Fenwick Notes, looked back on his Hawkshead days and depicted himself as a passionate nutter. Like most of his schoolfellows, Wordsworth used to go nutting within the coppice of the Esthwaite vale, particularly the widespread woods stretching from the side of Esthwaite Lake towards Graythwaite. He also clearly stated that his verses arose out of the remembrance of the feelings he had experienced in that interval of time. On top of that, in a note to line 4 of the 1800 edition of the poem, he claimed that the cottage-door from which the lyrical I departs harks back to the house where he had stayed in the years of his grammar-school attendance (qtd. *ibid.*). In this way, he affectionately paid homage to Ann Tyson (Hugh Tyson's wife), the kind-hearted, childless lady with whom he had boarded in Lancashire, and who became a sort of surrogate mother for him.

⁶ Apart from its published version, three longer manuscript drafts of the poem survive, opening with an address to a 'beloved Maid' generally identified with the mythologised Lucy figure. In this article, I refer to the *Lyrical Ballads'* 55-line text included in Angelo Righetti's bilingual edition of a selection of Wordsworth's works. See Wordsworth [1800] 2016: 86-91.

Far from boiling down to a mere paratextual corollary, this biographical supplement reinforces the poem's communicative power by setting the seal, so to speak, on its attesting value grounded in the author's kinship ties and his intimate dialogue with the botanical realm. On the other hand, the aesthetic and literary component brings into play the typical "colouring of the imagination" which, in Wordsworth's poetics, is meant to immortalise experience and heuristically heighten our perceptions of what may lie beneath its opaque or threadbare veneer. In the parable that informs "Nutting", this interlacing between a real-life occurrence and its metaphorical transposition is immediately foregrounded via a complicit, half-joking and even mock-heroic register, through which the reminiscing authorial persona seems to be «[g]ently poking fun» (Ottum 2016: 259) at his younger self:

It seems a day,
(I speak of one from many singled out)
One of those heavenly days which cannot die,
When forth I sallied from our cottage-door,
And with a wallet o'er my shoulder slung,
A nutting crook in hand, I turn'd my steps
Towards the distant woods, a Figure quaint,
Trick'd out in proud disguise of Beggar's weeds
Put on for the occasion, by advice
And exhortation of my frugal Dame.
Motley accoutrement! [...]

(ll. 1-11, Wordsworth [1800] 2016: 86-88)

Marked out by an underlying thread of irony and ambivalence, the poem's opening curiously hints at a sense of inadequacy and premonition. Something is off balance here from the very beginning: the abrupt incipit's indented line (in some editions preceded by a long dash) is followed by an entirely bracketed sentence and then a solemn reference to a heavenly day that might possibly inspire metaphysical thoughts. Yet, we are soon brought down to earth when the speaking I turns storyteller and starts reconstructing his journey towards the woods, again alluding to a funny disproportion between the frugality of the ambience – the «Beggar's weeds» (l. 8) recommended by the «frugal Dame» (l. 10) of Lakeland's cottage – and the expectations and pride of the untrained adolescent setting forth on his quest as a preposterous knight errant. This «Figure quaint» (l. 7), however, is not a literalisation of the babe-in-the-woods proverbial character, being in fact well-equipped for his treasure hunt. Indeed, the wallet and

crook metonymically prefigure the nut-gathering expedition into a pristine grove of hazel trees which, as anticipated, is bound to degenerate into a deflowering exploit.

Altogether, “Nutting” is structured around three main argumentative segments, the first one (ll. 1-13) toying with a Blakean phase of innocence that plunges the reader (or the intratextual listener, if we approach it as a conversation poem) into a Grimm-like folkloric backdrop, with the fresh wanderer fancifully dressed in ragged clothes just about to venture on a forest penetration (along with the rite of passage lying in ambush there). The second segment (ll. 13-42) focuses on the epiphanic encounter with a «virgin scene» of unspoilt Edenic beauty, a «dear nook» that the nut-gatherer has the privilege to contemplate after a confrontation with the wild natural landscape:

[...] Among the woods,
And o'er the pathless rocks, I forc'd my way
Until, at length, I came to one dear nook
Unvisited, where not a broken bough
Droop'd with its wither'd leaves, ungracious sign
Of devastation, but the hazels rose
Tall and erect, with milk-white clusters hung,
A virgin scene! – A little while I stood,
Breathing with such suppression of the heart
As joy delights in [...]

(ll. 13-22, Wordsworth [1800] 2016: 88)

Here, the light tones of parody give way to a less jejune portrayal of the human protagonist. With his virile energy, he hews out a path towards an undefiled green temple that seems to incorporate and, at the same time, transcend feminine/masculine binaries. The phallic verticality of the trees – in all probability, *Corylus avellana* – is counterpoised by the breast-like roundness of the white involucre containing the fruits, in a perfect androgynous marriage of elements guaranteeing fertility. If a direct comparison with the biblical Tree of Life or Tree of Knowledge is perhaps far-fetched, there is little doubt that this is a very special, untainted place. The presence of an arcane quality is suggested at both the level of lexical choices and through prosodic/rhythmic patterns. The previously smooth movement of syntactic constructions over the blank verse leaves room for suspenseful shifts and startling effects enhanced by a strategic use of the enjambement (as in lines 15, 16, 17). Such a syncopated rhythm reveals itself as a dis-

tinguishing feature for the rest of the poem, together with «[a]lliterations and assonances, plus the magnificent sounds of English onomatopoeia (especially the climactic "crash" [44, line-end] of the patient hazel), [which] make the language virtually palpable» (Nevelidine 1996: 667).

The portion of text comprised in lines 22-42 has long represented a crucible for critics, who have advanced several arguments ranging into psychology (with Geoffrey Hartman in the front rank), psychoanalysis (in a Freudian/Lacanian key, from primary narcissism and onanistic fantasies to a final act of castration of the phallic mother, objectified by the tree laden with milky fruits), anthropology and archetype theory. Intertextuality similarly constitutes a beaten track (Virgil, Ovid, Milton, the biblical figure of Cain as the prototypical transgressor), combined with an intriguing metaliterary perspective that traces the protagonist's fascination with, and eventual dismantling of the bucolic setting, to Wordsworth's efforts to break free from an anxiety of influence engendered by the founding fathers of pastoral or romance traditions⁷. The consequent ravage of the virgin nook would thus allegorise the modern poet's counter-response to the (Spenserian) «romance of the Mutilated Bower» (Jacobus 2012: 62).

As for the interpretation endorsed in this paper, our standpoint is essentially aligned with ecocritical scholarship and its identification of "Nutting" as a proto-environmentalist work. Concerning this, moreover, one cannot exclude that Wordsworth was taking stock of the new «anti-foraging laws» passed in 1766 (Carroll 2016: 213), namely the "Cultivation of Trees" and "Preservation of Timber Trees" Acts, which gave further official status to the safeguarding of trees, roots, plants, shrubs, and woods. Yet, there is no denying that the dreamy, enthralling, and eroticised imagery saturating lines 22-42, prior to the I's yielding to the impulse of violence, is powerfully evocative and hermeneutically open to multiple readings. In the space of twenty-one lines, the poetic subject manages to keep at bay

⁷ Robert Burns Nevelidine alerts us to the multiple ways in which, from the second half of the twentieth century, "Nutting" has «position[ed] critics hermeneutically [...]. To read "Nutting" is thus inevitably to navigate a wilderness of commentary, as much as to construe the poem's tropes» (Nevelidine 1996: 674-675). While arguing for pertinent parallels with Virgil's *Georgics*, Kurt Heinzelman even compiles a list of the poem's genre classifications by scholars, who have bracketed it with a *rite de passage* or conversion narrative, a Coleridgean conversation poem, a pastoral playlet, or a male violent struggle for self-determination (Heinzelman 2000: 151). For a study of the correlations with an initiatory ritual, see Pipkin 1978.

greed and libidinal instincts *vis-à-vis* the «banquet» (l. 24) by deferring and sublimating gratification. After merrily playing with the flowers, he concocts a pastoral script featuring a bower that shelters violets, rippling water-breaks, and mossy stones similar to a flock of sheep, where he rests his cheek so as to hear «the murmur and the murmuring sound» (l. 37), while his «heart luxuriates with *indifferent things*» (l. 40; my italics). Then all at once, halfway through line 42, the pretence dissolves.

The poem's third segment (ll. 42-55) is announced by means of a strident caesura, harsh onomatopoeic sounds and the plastic image of the boy who, no longer content with childish fiddling, rises from his prone position and gives free rein to a physical assault that smacks of a rape and is of a piece with a postlapsarian, evil gesture:

[...] Then up I rose,
And dragg'd to earth both branch and bough, with crash
And merciless ravage; and the shady nook
Of hazels, and the green and mossy bower
Deform'd and sullied, patiently gave up
Their quiet being: and unless I now
Confound my present feelings with the past,
Even then, when from the bower I turn'd away,
Exulting, rich beyond the wealth of kings
I felt a sense of pain when I beheld
The silent trees and the intruding sky. —
(ll. 42-52, Wordsworth [1800] 2016: 88-90)

The so-far erased vitality of the plants – previously associated with the dead matter of «indifferent things» – and their higher, wiser spiritual essence, as they «patiently gave up / Their quiet being» (ll. 46-47), are the gist of the lesson that Nature imparts to the anthropocentric subject, who is thus prompted to meditate on the abusive excesses of a reifying attitude that may totally blind one to the existence (and suffering) of otherness. In his brisk and transformative trajectory from «a parodic laborer to a parasitic one to a grave transgressor» (Heinzelman 2000: 157), the boy comes to recognise that “green things” are indeed alive.

This enlightened understanding, which is sparked in the footsteps of wounding, «chaos, estrangement, and loss» (Engh 2023: 673), has an evident undercurrent of bitterness. At the same time, the use of the word «pain» (l. 51), instead of 'pity', is an index that the *Einfühlung* threshold has definitively been crossed. The «nonverbal semiosis» conveyed by the

hazels' funereal silence and the sky's observant gaze, embodying entities who «"know" things and have purposes» (Wheeler 2014: 126-127), will continue to loom large, as hinted by the conflation of the boy's past agnition and the poet's mature awareness («unless I now / Confound my present feelings with the past», ll. 47-48). To all appearances, the resonances of this kind of emotion are too far-reaching to be just recollected (and appeased) "in tranquillity".

Repairing wrongdoing: towards an ecopedagogical conclusion

In an important sense, as underscored above, «the speaker himself experiences and learns anew from the events that he recounts as he recounts them» (Tong 2005: 112), arguably feeling the need to sort out a moral tangle by living it over in his mind across time barriers. In addition to this personal perimeter, however, the poem broadens the communicative horizon through a coda encapsulating an apostrophe to an anonymous female interlocutor, commonly identified with Dorothy, Wordsworth's sister, who had accompanied him during the German trip (or a friend named Lucy, herself an alleged plunderer of the autumn woods):

Then, dearest Maiden! move along these shades
In gentleness of heart; with gentle hand
Touch, — for there is a Spirit in the woods.

(ll. 53-55, Wordsworth [1800] 2016: 90)

Separated from the preceding lines by a dash and a typographical space, this exhortation does not so much consist, in my view, in a formal or gender-biased, patronising bow to the moral-of-the-story convention. It might instead be read as a heuristic complement to the I's epiphany, i.e. to a paradigm-shifting discernment that would sit comfortably with the Emersonian concept of the "Over-Soul", as well as with the precepts of panpsychism and *Anima Mundi*. This is suggested by the neat declarative sentence purposefully placed at the end of the line – and of the poem – as a testament to the existence of a vigilant silvan Spirit. «Gentleness of heart» and «touch» becomes therefore the watchword for the beloved Maiden, a blessedly "raw recruit" who, along with the reader, is being urged to circumvent harm and foster stewardship for the natural world with pas-

sionate conviction. In today's idiom, one could affirm that the addressee is stimulated to think fragility, tread lightly on the planet, and adopt eco-caring practices.

Stated differently, wrongdoing can be repaired by *not* being oblivious, by committing ourselves to incentivising intersubjective and intergenerational cooperation in view of a collective construction of gentleness and the implementation of an «environment that is our “second nature”» (Castellano 2013: 5). Atoning for the signs of devastation brings with itself a process of introspection and shared empathy-building that can help us learn about the ontological essence of plant creatures and gain wisdom while doing so.

There is even more reason for this to be the case when considering that, according to historical and anthropological inheritance, hazels did typify the “Trees of Wisdom”. Among the Druids and in medieval European folklore, the *Corylus* genus was deemed an emblem of intuition, nurturing, healing, compassion, and reciprocity⁸, further confirming the perfect suitability of Wordsworth's choice.

⁸ For a contextualised review of these attributes through the lens of historical and cultural inheritance and “plant wisdom”, see Neumann 2025, especially the book section dedicated to “Trees & Shrubs”.

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