
Wordsworth's "Nutting" and the Violent End of Reading

Prelude

By 1790, Wordsworth is exploring revolutionary France with his friend Robert Jones. That same year, the Bastille having been stormed and his manuscripts' fate uncertain, the Marquis de Sade walks away from Charenton asylum, poor but free, to set his affairs in order.

About Sade's compulsive rewritings of traditional themes, Foucault remarks that it was "not in view of a dialectical reward, but toward a radical exhaustion" ("Language to Infinity" 62). And, belatedly, Bloom has remarked that "the romance-of-trespass, of violating a sacred or daemonic ground, is a central form in modern literature, from Coleridge and Wordsworth to the present" (*A Map of Misreading* 35).

This chapter is not overtly concerned with the relationship between Sade and Wordsworth—contemporaneous and yet ostensibly worlds apart. But the time has been long in coming when Sade and Wordsworth would meet openly on that ground.

Introduction

Wordsworth criticism has been focusing again on "Nutting," the blank-verse allegory he completed in 1799, first published in the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), and never assimilated into *The Prelude*, for which he originally intended it.¹ The speaker of the poem, a young man "with a huge wallet o'er [his] shoulders slung, / A nutting crook in hand . . ." (ll. 6–7), leaves home one day in search of hazelnuts. He sounds optimistic enough. When he discovers a worthy tree, he becomes positively playful, but ends up decimating the hazel in a scene

of "merciless ravage" (l. 45), and never returns home with his harvest. It is the speaker's startling violence that has most often attracted criticism.

For example, Rachel Crawford, in "The Structure of the Sororal in Wordsworth's 'Nutting,'" reads in this allegory Freudian acts of primary narcissism and castrating vehemence against the phallic mother, complementing similar assertions in Jonathan Arac's "Wordsworth's 'Nutting': Suspension and Decision" with her own concerns for the mechanisms of sisterhood. Crawford seems correct in identifying the sororal as a neglected yet crucial issue here.² Charles Altieri, also responding to Arac, takes yet another approach. He suggests, even more powerfully than Arac, that in Wordsworth's short poem occurs the founding moment of modernity. According to Altieri, the hero of the narrative (that is, the poet), frustrated over the inadequacy of the pastoral mode in representing fully the power of the poetic spirit, seeks violence against nature, positioned as object vis-à-vis this newfound source of subjectivity. "Nutting" is thus a "great achievement" (Altieri 190) in establishing the origins of the modern spirit of poetry in the drastic convolutions of the romantic self. All these critics share with their predecessors an assumption about the gender of the hazel's "mutilated bower"³ (l. 50), as well as emphases on routine psychoanalytical modes, problems of poetic form, and even neo-Hegelian dialectics over issues regarding sexual difference per se, which the poem would seem so meretriciously to advertise.

As far back as the sixties, when "Nutting"—receiving sudden, avid attention—was often implied to be a masturbatory fantasy,⁴ these emphases were common, along with the implication that a bower must be female if a male character, in a male heterosexual's poem, assails it. Perhaps it is the rare critic with heterosexual imperatives and prerogatives, feminist or not, who would dare suggest otherwise.

Arac, for instance, in confusing the poem's supposed phallic mother ("dubious fetishism") and feminine lack ("culturally valued sublimation"), seems incapable of conceiving, so to speak, an alternative to conventional readings, when in "Nutting" he finds "something with no natural existence, an act which could not occur" (45): not only because nature is female and therefore always already castrated, but because the poem's representational mode is allegorical—that is, not real.

This is a failure of the imagination, and perhaps lack of experience, that, we should not be surprised to learn,

Wordsworth does not share. Indeed, enough evidence exists in "Nutting" to support the claim that the self-effacing antihero of the poem expends himself, in fact, upon a *male* bower. This idea would challenge not only certain fairly predictable Freudian, Lacanian, structuralist, and deconstructive readings of Wordsworth's troubling different-sex politics, but—even more fundamentally—the troubled relationship of reader to poem. Yet, though "Nutting" has been nothing if not seductive as a subject for criticism, its confusing strategies work rather to discourage than encourage further readings. If "the allegorical work tends to prescribe the direction of its own commentary" (Craig Owens, referring to Northrop Frye, 53),⁵ "Nutting," then, tells us to go south.

At first arousing interest, the poem ultimately makes it impossible for different readers of different orientations to respond in ways that would satisfy critical criteria of accountability and universality, to say nothing of the aesthetics of autonomy and sensibility. In Kantian terms, it is hardly a pure object of beauty, and thus judgments about it cannot but be less than perfect. More than a founding, heuristic text, "Nutting" constitutes "that blind confrontation of antithetical meanings which characterizes the allegory of unreadability" (Owens 79)—but not deconstructive indeterminability so much as implosion, foreclosure, expenditure, undoing. In Hegelian terms (but contra Hegel, via Deleuze's *Nietzsche*), "Nutting" dramatizes the all-consuming exertions of the master ("total critique") over the recuperative labor of the slave ("self-consciousness"). In Benthamite terms, to subvert the utilitarian, the poem's narrator makes a "fabulous waste" outside the "moral hygiene" of the behavioral and experiential catalog (see Rajchman 61ff.). In short, he forces an end subsuming the teleology of ends under a peculiarly brutal *telos* of *end*.

Silence to an End

It appears odd when a critic, writing about sexual issues in Wordsworth's poetry, passes over "Nutting." Wayne Koestenbaum is a current example, providing an opportunity to fill in some of the background against which the poem so disturbingly echoes.

"Nutting" is indeed one very erotically charged poem omitted from Koestenbaum's analysis of the erotics of Wordsworth

and Coleridge's literary collaboration, *Double Talk*. Koestenbaum focuses on *Lyrical Ballads*, specifically, those poems on which the two poets actually collaborated, such as "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and "We Are Seven," and on those in which closet dramas of homoerotic tension are being played out, such as "Simon Lee" and "The Nightingale," along with several poems written before the poets' first encounter. "Nutting" would seem to be more than just a curious omission here. Its openly sexual content, coming across nevertheless as displacement of troubling impulses onto nature through poetry—though veiled by Wordsworth's particular type of decorum—is by now hard to miss.

Koestenbaum's is an inexplicable, seductive omission, and for several reasons. To begin with, it could be argued, and it has been argued, that once Wordsworth and Coleridge met in September 1795 in Bristol, having already maintained a mutual attraction for some time, they lost a sort of double innocence that would never be recovered, even had this been desirable. Indeed, their most individual work kept in circulation a dialog revealing the more neurotic, spiteful, devious, and of course darkly erotic aspects of collaboration, of which *Lyrical Ballads* forms but one record.

Thus, for example, the conspiracy of that revolutionary poetic project later degenerates into Wordsworth's individual piracy in the preface to his own *Poems* (1815) of Coleridge's ideas about the imagination as he expressed them in his lectures on Milton and Shakespeare—followed by Coleridge's unusually swift but carefully damaging response in *Biographia Literaria* (Modiano "The Ethics of Gift Exchange" 243). There, Coleridge holds up the rules of these two most eminent of English poets, along with Bowles, not simply to measure his opponent, but to beat him with them—in his own words "*per argumentum baculinum*," by the argument from the stick (*Biographia* 93).

Now the *Biographia* is itself a bold piracy, plundering the avant-garde German philosophy of the time to augment its author's weaponry. Both the 1815 preface and the *Biographia* were meant to affirm ascendancy in discourses each writer had long before deferred to the other: in Wordsworth's case philosophy, in Coleridge's poetry, or poetic theory; obviously, however, their roles had long been switched and were only reinforced by these documents.

Moreover, in the case of "Nutting," it remains an open question whether Wordsworth attempts to allegorize the plundering of another's poetical bower—namely Coleridge's, as in "This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison," or whether the poem is designed to confess and thereby exorcise rancor and assuage opponents. In the light of other more powerful Wordsworth-Coleridge exchanges, it could only fail in doing so. Yet with its "merciless ravage" (l. 45), the loud crash of its violation, which the speaker tries to muffle by claiming sympathy for the fetishized hazel and admonishing readers "with gentle hand [to] / Touch" (ll. 55–56), "Nutting" calls attention to the destruction and expenditure of sex, especially male sex. Koestenbaum tends to concentrate on this as a paradigm for wasteful, redundant, possessive poetical fashioning. Male anality may be privileged (Koestenbaum 37, 41), but his shaky reliance on the heterosexual model of (re-)production disjoins his pliant critical model (71)—even though this model applies to the poets' own conceptions; the imitative procreation by males without females (an ancient myth revived by the romantics); and their traffic in women, Annette Vallon, Dorothy, Mary, the two Saras, all the ladies and maidens and friends of the poems.

Koestenbaum both vitiates praiseworthy intentions to increase, as it were, the validity of gay male literary criticism, and ignores *reception*. He notes, "The *Lyrical Ballads* is not centrally concerned with an erotics of writing" (71), which is to state the obvious; but he chooses to occlude biography, and also the pleasures and pains of listening. Wordsworth and Coleridge would read their drafts to each other and to small familiar audiences. That is, what these two men expected their work to *do* to the receiver was crucial. Collaboration does not simply involve an erotics of writing; it is just as powerfully one of reading, between collaborators, between groups of collaborators, between them and their audiences, which were mostly female, in contrast to the homosexual economy among the poets.⁶

If Wordsworth's preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* can be trusted, the ways in which his and Coleridge's offspring was received concerned them deeply. "Several of my Friends are anxious for the success of these Poems," Wordsworth confesses near the beginning (Hutchinson and De Selincourt edition 734), and continues to emphasize the instruction and delight of the Reader capitalized, however conventionally. The negative criticism with which the volume was soon greeted

became a source of friction for the collaborators, and even an occasion for delight, to Coleridge (*Biographia* chapter 4), one that would continue to generate the heat of composition, reading, and reply as each accused the other of sabotaging the original project. As the revised *Lyrical Ballads* increasingly became Wordsworth's volume alone, according to the byline, at least, his proprietorship expanded in proportion to his own Wordsworthian myth of self-creation.

Finally, perhaps, Koestenbaum avoids reading "Nutting" precisely because it isn't readerly, allegorizing as it does male literary volition as violation, directly concerning an erotics, rather, of the *writerly* text.

"Nutting" in Con-text

Barthes writes, "I love the text because for me it is that rare locus of language from which any 'scene' (in the household, conjugal sense of the term), any logomachy is absent" (15-16). "Nutting" dramatizes departure from the *heimlich*: not only does the speaker leave home, apparently never to return,⁷ and engage the other, the poem stands apart from the central Wordsworthian oeuvre, disturbing and disrupting the well-maintained mechanism of recompense, of recuperation after loss, that makes reading Wordsworth so often an exercise in resolution. Logomachy, a war of words, is absent here, because it is marginalized. Disincluded from *The Prelude*, "Nutting" is that unassimilable, unproductive part that Bataille describes (142),⁸ perhaps because the speaker of the poem is supposed to remain distinct from Wordsworth's more sympathetic persona or personas in the larger poem. "Nutting" falls handily under the Coleridgean rubric of "poems of the imagination," along with such narratives as "The Thorn" and "Tintern Abbey," with which it is contemporary (Magnuson 180),⁹ but it does not occupy a particularly noticeable position relative to those more famous poems.

By comparison, the allegorizing of "The Thorn" seems more that of the ventriloquist who must directly address readers in the second person, both to fool and to wink at, buttonholing them like Coleridge's compulsive storyteller. Except that in Wordsworth the speaker constructs his attachment out of hearsay and not participatory experience, or

so it would seem. The narrator or Wordsworth exploits the ballad form while claiming lack of penetration into Martha Ray's case: "More I know not, I wish I did, / And it should all be told to you" (ll. 144-45). Nevertheless, he positions her obsessively next to the phallic tree, perhaps, as Koestenbaum suggests (86), to replace the child she has lost with the thorn's linguistic impregnation.

In "Tintern Abbey," the speaker, who is typically identified with Wordsworth, effects an even more insidious, extraordinary, positively sublime subordination, in the Kantian sense, of the female subject, Dorothy. She is fixed by the poet throughout the narrative yet addressed only toward the end, once he has finished writing "nature and the language of the sense" (l. 108) into his private moral agenda. This "dear, dear Friend," object of condescension, and hyperrationalization, must notwithstanding accept the responsibility of retaining the poet's present feelings for later tranquil recollection—easy access, in other words—as an inviolate vessel, "a mansion for all lovely forms" (l. 140), ones which the speaker alone has articulated and stored within the apostrophized Friend for future exploitation. Her true identity, including sexual, like the speaker's but far less generalized, must remain hidden.

Dorothy's own journals, of course, served a similarly useful purpose. It may be that, the more Wordsworth used them, the more she wrote to be used. The faceless female is made to resemble Wordsworth's image for the poem in his prefaces: the poem's comparable ideality, along with its ability to be reified, makes it the only other such possible cache of emotion. The poem is "the rock of defense of human nature" (preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*), a site of loss and, more crucially, of recovery of the unfamiliar compelled into familiarity, and just as rigorously protected from the corruption of the "getting and spending" world.

Once matured within a falsely Edenic environment, the Friend will anyhow draw upon these feelings for her own protection and peace of mind. Presumably, she has no original feelings to claim, despite, and not as a result of, her romanticized youth.¹⁰ Memory becoming memorialization, in Wordsworth, becomes language's act of violence upon whatever silence, whatever oblivion, that might have spared these and other female subjects, especially Lucy, from the poet's peculiar forms of romantic importunities.

Wordsworth's much earlier "Lines, Left upon a Seat in a Yew-Tree," completed the year he met Coleridge and the first blank verse to appear in Wordsworth's own arrangement of his poems, contrasts with "Nutting" by preserving instead of ruining its isolated vessel, "this deep vale" (l. 46), in order to house the spirit of its "favoured Being" (l. 6). He, like the hero of "Nutting," goes forth into nature and never comes back, but because the poem is meant to record a useful admonishment, it confidently anticipates the itinerant *reader's* return. Thus, these "Lines" offer another example of unproductive solitude, or self-absorption, though not as radically expensive as, say, the subject's in Shelley's *Alastor*, that critiques Wordsworth. In the yew-tree "Lines," as in "Nutting," the reading figure is apostrophized, as "Traveller" and "Stranger," and admonished to pass by the charged spot in a particular manner.

Of all these narratives, "Nutting" is the most difficult to read, not least because of its overt violence, arresting the reader, almost loud enough to drown out its troubling implications—a destruction so powerful as to incapacitate deconstruction, or a reconfiguration of oppositions. The action in the poem exceeds a rationalized, cathartic sexual economy as described by Freud: "as is well known, temptations are merely increased by constant frustration, whereas an occasional satisfaction of them causes them to diminish, at least for the time being" (73). But "Nutting" hardly achieves the "nonhegemonic (and ultimately homoerotic) economy of desire" of Bataille (Shaviro *Passion and Excess* 95).¹¹ Like the "Lines" localized to the yew tree and to Tintern Abbey, "Nutting" provides an early example of Wordsworth's mature mode of time-spot blank verse, impossible without the earlier example of Coleridge's conversation poems. Yet the Wordsworth poem seems more willful, staged, artificial, openly deliberate—quite unlike the perfectly natural or effortless poem of the Wordsworthian stereotype.

In a word, "Nutting" is thoroughly allegorical, but in a manner almost polymorphously perverse, which alone describes a range of positive and negative responses.

An Allegory of Reading's End

Indeed, the poem demands an allegorical reading, even though direct correspondences to objects and processes outside the poem remain tenuous, if not evaporative. Put another

way, as Crawford remarks, while "the story of 'Nutting' can be simply paraphrased," the ambiguous symbology of the poem impedes both the flow of the poem's narrative and the flow of the narrative of reading—as well as any complete identification with the speaker. The poem attempts to interpellate and interpolate readers as violators. But it succeeds instead in forcing those readers into metacritical positions that call attention to their subject-formations in terms of sexuality. Voyeurs, seduced into violating, end up reading themselves into and out of the task of "Nutting."

Certainly the poem offers readers plenty of imagery to arouse prurient interest, raising questions about Wordsworth's own sexual, and textual, intentions. The ambiguities of its images, however, prevent us from uncovering any secrets, altering a Coleridgean sublime of indefiniteness (Wlecke 73–94) into a more Burkean sublime of terror and pity that is meant to mask the speaker's own subjectivity. His empathetic pain, occurring upon objectification from his mutilating act, transmutes into the muted pleasure of his realizing his own survival, even if the terms of existence have altered permanently. It is as if the violence performed in the poem is so great as to obliterate all traces of the victim's identity, leaving only ruin and the boy's now merely, or absolutely, imperative ("move," "touch") consciousness. "Merciless ravage" thus becomes more than partaking, more than taking: it is taking away. It is a decimation, one that reaffirms and violates the violator equally. It is a sexual exchange: both parties are affected, though the male would prefer to retain his innocence—in both the legal and sexual senses. But the loss is difficult to identify.

Nutting cannot be *merely* a performance, sexually or poetically. In the conflict enacted by the boy, either he or the bower must succeed. Instead, the self he might have sought is permanently lost along with his very presence. And the bower is decimated beyond recognition, in the Lacanian as well as the journalistic sense. There shall be no evidence remaining to alert anyone but the solitary reader to the boy's breaking of social taboos.

Beforehand, the phallic images, of course, predominate. The hazel—"tall and erect, with tempting clusters hung" (l. 20)—most closely resembles the thorn in the poem of that name: "it stands erect, and like a stone / With lichens is it overgrown" (ll. 10–11). It also resembles "the woods of autumn, and their

hidden bowers / With milk-white clusters hung" in *The Two-Part Prelude of 1799* (ll. 235–36).¹² The overtly masculine shape of the images in "Nutting," which are virtually impossible to mistake for female, renders incomprehensible—except to those sensitive to his (hetero)sexism—Harold Bloom's claim that "the rough analogy is with the human female body" (*The Visionary Company* 129), as well as Margaret Homans's reading of this bower as a woman's (1981 240). Maybe they make the bower female for similar though opposite reasons: Bloom, to ensure that any male protagonist of Wordsworth's will figure nature as the *other* gender, however exploitive the reinscription of heterosexism; Homans, to ensure that the female gender is the one being violated, all the more to indict Wordsworth's motivations as oppressive, however admirably revisionist Homans's feminism might be.¹³

At any rate, phallic imagery abounds in Wordsworth: trees, crags, mountains, eminences, even gibbets (the hanged are said to become erect, even ejaculate)¹⁴—all of which are usually isolated, privileged symbols of the powerful masculine gender principle as it imposes itself upon the landscape.¹⁵ The dead man in Esthwaite's Lake (*The Prelude*, 1805, V, ll. 450–81)—who "bolt upright / Rose"—represents a clearly Burkean and Freudian moment of terror and guilt repressed by language or the "romance" (l. 477) of the boy's reading that can, so he claims, relieve him of libidinous, parricidal impulses.¹⁶

This is the very definition of a fetish—poetry taking the place of the violence it describes as absent in its own present.¹⁷ The terrific enjambment here on "Rose" recalls the speaker's powerful movement in "Nutting": there, he says, "Then up I rose" (l. 43, where the word prominently *ends* the line), before he brings down the hazel. In both instances, rising sexual action leads to a fall into a consciousness of death that words can scarcely screen.

What, then, is the nature of the deflowering in "Nutting"? Is it a rape of the male-as-nature (or nature-as-male), with a deeply sadistic component—again, obsessively, "merciless ravage" (l. 45)? The speaker, after all, carries "a huge wallet o'er [his] shoulders slung, / A nutting-crook in hand" (ll. 6–7), a huge endowment, from behind, and proceeds to ravish a phallic symbol plus the nearest virgin opening he can find, that "green and mossy bower, / Deformed and sullied" (ll. 46–47) contrasting with "one of those green stones / That,

fleeced with moss, under the shady trees, / Lay around [him]" (ll. 35–37), which may conceal some feminine principle to tempt the boy away from his desired objective: an inexperienced male orifice.

Frances Ferguson suggests that the boy's hesitation to ravage the bower is meant to allow nature time to seduce him after a gratification "too easily won" (73). In other words, he discovers more than he had hoped for: "A virgin scene!" (l. 21)—three loaded words at the beginning of the line, and with an exclamation mark prominently positioned. Such an object itself incites to ravish, according to the terms of the poem. The "mutilated bower" would typically imply a female organ, but is it not perhaps a rather male opening, that "green and mossy bower" instead of "one of those green stones / fleeced with moss"? Or do those stones themselves represent a circle of male parts, an audience for the boy's conquest?¹⁸ The allegory does not lend itself to an absolute correspondence of images, yet the drama and its actors cannot, almost helplessly, but suggest this kind of sublimated fantasy.

Nevertheless, the exact nature of the symbolism remains mysterious. Does the "figure quaint" leave his "frugal Dame" to pursue what are to him probably illicit desires? or to satisfy *any* desire because this woman—mother, sister, wife? Ann Tyson?¹⁹—is inadequate, in which case the "maiden" would substitute and complete the sexual, allegorical triangle? While the eroticism is undeniable, the prefix (homo-, hetero-, bi-, even a-) to the act of sexuality shifts, leaving only speculation and a reminder of the ultimate emptiness of the oppressive sexual signifier.²⁰

"Nutting," to paraphrase Crawford, is more "ingenious" than simply to veil a disturbing act. The poem itself pauses many times. Indeed, the first line begins *in medias res* after a long dash covering six absent syllables. It includes nine dashes and liberal caesuras. But then there are as many sudden, startling, intrusive enjambments, such as "through beds of matted fern, and tangled thickets, / *Forcing* my way" (ll. 15–16, emphasis added). "Nutting" textualizes sex, sexualizes language, teases the reader just as the boy teases the hazel remaining erect while he dallies on the fleecy stones,²¹ finally rearing up and completing his "service," but savagely. Repetitions echo libidinous yearnings, as in l. 38: "I heard the murmur and the

murmuring sound." The meter, highly syncopated in Wordsworth's experimental fashion, follows the inciting and discouraging rhythms of seduction: "the heart luxuriates with indifferent things, / Wasting its kindliness on stocks and stones, / And on the vacant air" (ll. 41–43).

Alliterations and assonances, plus the magnificent sounds of English onomatopoeia, especially the climactic "crash" (l. 44, line end) of the patient hazel, make the language virtually palpable. But what really happened, despite all the noise, remains unknown, which seduces, too. It is as if the reader were not there, to hear the falling of a hazel in the woods:

All the categories of language and consciousness, all the structures of subjectivity and objectivity, of intuition and comprehension, have collapsed, and yet an indefinable violence, a sense of pain or ecstasy, remains. "Something" subsists, even when there is no revelation, no truth, nothing to be found. [Shaviro *Passion and Excess* 88]

"Nutting" involves recollection versus recalled immediacy ("unless I now / Confound my present feelings with the past" [ll. 48–49]), the most abused Wordsworthian trope. Foucault's fugitive vision of male-to-male sexuality applies here: it inspires the recollection of an act that was performed too quickly for recognition, either of self or of other. An elegiacal, melancholy gazing after the departed object lingers, while all the literary mechanisms of concealment and revelation—that is, diagesis—play through the mind over and over again, offering the promise of the object's continual return ("Sexual Choice, Sexual Act" 223).

Reading/Nutting

Because "Nutting" solicits allegory and an allegorical reader, each reader may take a literarily prurient interest, but not simply because, as Foucault cuttingly remarks, "underneath everything said, we suspect that another thing is being said" ("The Discourse of History" 21). The poem, if read literally, might not merit all the criticism it has recently been offered. Further, certain elements of the poem—manipulations of styles and especially figures—call attention to its allegorical nature. But just as the bower must be portrayed as virgin in order all the more violently to be ravaged, the poem remains indirect,

inviting the transgressive act of scanning through its verses, the to-and-fro of earth-breaking (*versus*) and dissemination (semelfaction). And then the force of repeated readings fatigues as well as exhilarates us. The search for the most applicable allegorical reading leads *down*, like the very act of scanning the verses, to disaffection, even disgust, the depression resulting from the most fantastic masturbation, though Wordsworth be the subject and we (critics) the witnesses.

What Allan Stoekl reads in Bataille can perhaps be read in "Nutting": "the terminal subversion of the pseudostable references that had made allegory and its hierarchies seem possible" (xiv). Wordsworth dramatizes and confirms such a headless allegory by having his subject force down the hazel's top and disperse both the subject's and the hazel's self-possession(s), "[w]asting . . . kindness" (l. 42) in both senses, among all the senses. Similarly, the poem effects a linguistic and sexual perturbation in readers by not allowing them to remain mere observers, much as it seems to ignore them. Seduction, indeed. And abandonment.

Because the poem begs a reading that would substitute external for internal figures—whether that of the mind/nature dichotomy (Ferguson 73), guilt over literary indolence (Magnuson 180), justifiable destruction of the phallic mother's threat (Arac 45), or demonstration of poetical authority (Galperin 140)—it also begs the reader to adopt the subject-position of ravisher, importunate, as to meaning. Hence, Galperin's contention that the reader finds it difficult to identify with the speaker (95) is apparent to the point of impracticability, even though his interpretation of the reader's being marginalized is thoroughly practical, in terms of apostrophization—that is, the reader cannot be the maiden. "Nutting" interpellates the reader as a violator, interpolating him or her into the poem, which itself had for some time existed as an undiscovered bower whose discovery has pleased Wordsworthians and anti-Wordsworthians alike.

Galperin, an example of the former, reads "Nutting" as yet one more early demonstration of the undermining of genius's authority that would only develop, rather than fail, during Wordsworth's decline. "Nutting" has thus become an allegory of reading, a poem about writing and getting re(a)d, ruining its symbols just as surely as the boy brings down the hazel tree "deformed and sullied" (l. 47), an accurate description of the act of reading the act of nutting. It bloodies the bloodier.

In the meantime, the speaker of the poem remains disguised as a romantic "figure" and then perhaps as a "spirit in the woods": the *I* is concealed while the reader's *eye* is brought out into the open, forced to look, like Anthony Burgess's intrusive criminal, at the very acts he has performed over and over again, for the sake of some perverse discipline. Readers or subjects cannot remain disguised; every reading discovers them, shocks them into the recognition of their own complicity. Revealed in this way, readers are obliged to adopt a metapoetic stance in order to call attention to their own subject-positions vis-à-vis the poem, and to maintain *defensive* positions as well. Admittance to the violating act therefore *must* identify readers with the speaker critically, in both senses, forcing them to read, react, and respond from subjectivities that can no longer remain subconscious. Yet these responses remain defensive because they rely on sexualities that readers declare and live, not necessarily the multiple possibilities to which they themselves might be subject. The consciousness of the poem thinks it knows its readers, but knows only as much as any embodied come-on. "Nutting" backs them into a corner, rendering their defenses untenable by delimiting the terms of their reading.

Here is where Ferguson's interpretation comes across as the most believable: the imagination in this poem figures negatively, as absence, and, because nature "[deludes the speaker] into writing himself into his own text" (75), the reader has to do the same. Imagination sleeps while apprehension importunes. It is therefore possible, contra Galperin, that it is the reader who gets figured as the "maiden" (Magnuson, conventionally, reads her as Dorothy [182]),²² who should not tread too harshly on this fragile concatenation of speaker, poem, and narrative. "Nutting" can indeed inspire a variety of speculations—a strong poem to the extent that it manipulates responses (wholly disturbs), a weak one to the extent that the message remains linguistic and overconfident (remains wholly *and* merely literary).

At any rate, its effectiveness must be measured on the outside, in a manner of speaking, by how successfully it can embody itself apart not only from Wordsworth's gothic church of a life's work, never completed, to which it would seem only tangential, but apart from the very page on which he allowed the poem to appear and represent him.

"Nutting" as Con-catenation

This lyrical ballad, or antiballad, as Mary Jacobus might say, intersects with other genres that disturb it. "Nutting" is narrative but not stanzaical or rhymed; it moves in the manner of "Tintern Abbey," with its "fluctuating, overflowing blank verse . . . its restless enjambments and its disdain for borders" (Koestenbaum 82). The speaker's "sense of pain" (l. 52) suggests elegy, while the quaintness of the boy's appearance—indeed, the quaintness of his very self-consciousness, the very Spenserian diction in which his narrative is couched (that of the knight errant: "a Figure quaint / Tricked out in proud disguise of cast-off weeds / Which for that service had been husbanded . . . Motley accoutrement" [ll. 8-10,12])—is deliberate archaism, as had been Spenser's, along with the image of the feminized bower. Ferguson observes "an artful character stepping from the pages of romance narrative" (73).²³

But the poem hardly resolves—so unlike Wordsworth, or so critics have tended to think. Like Spenser's extended epic-allegory, it never quite finishes. And this is due partly to a complex of forms that is not perfectly synthesized.²⁴

"Nutting," as it leads us into the silence of the "far-distant wood" (l. 8), stays disquiet, admonitory, as if the hazel continues to vibrate along with the language, discouraging further action.²⁵ Is the poem responding, in a sexual and textual sense, to Coleridge's own bowers?²⁶ Does the poet want to ravage the rival's bower of poetry, of whom, as the boy, he claims to be "fearless" (l. 24)? Does "rival" here refer to what the "banquet" (l. 25) of the hazel, then, is not? And does the recognition of pain bespeak guilt over having deprived this adversary of some innocence, naturalness, perfection? We must acknowledge the pain in intercourse for the inexperienced, but here it is the penetrator who accepts the pain, or considers, quite openly, only his own, perhaps because it can only ever be referred to one's own, and is never completely displeasing.

Adela Pinch, wishing to deemphasize the notion that "engagement with literary suffering is like a form of personal violence," claims that ". . . meter and the invocation of sexual difference provide partial solutions" to the "pain" of reading (837). (Wordsworth hopes, in his prose prefaces, that meter will help restrain passion.)

Yet it is Elaine Scarry who, linking pain to the turning in upon oneself and the precluding of imagination, has perhaps the most to say to the convolution of the "Nutting" reading experience:

The less the object accommodates and expresses the inner requirements of the hunger, desire, or fear, the less there is an object for the state and only the state itself, the more it will approach the condition of pain. [169]²⁷

In other words, readers respond with their own sexual and damaged subjectivities, making it obvious that the poem has violated *them* through an act of consciousness-making. The seduction of "Nutting," as well as nutting, succeeds only in turning actors—whether inside or outside the text—back painfully upon themselves, rendering the poem far less interesting to look at than, as Coleridge might advise, to reimagine: a process of becoming self-aware yet necessarily disinterested sexually, since, admittedly, the artificiality of the style chills potential eroticism. "Nutting" rehearses, over and over again, this type of Kantian (virginal) sublime.

Finally, does the importunity of poetry gloat or feel, itself, guilty? To Galperin, the poem, purportedly a confession, by pushing aside the reader-as-confessor and then the reader-as-auditor, becomes dramatic monolog, pleased with its own speaker's perfect reception (96). This monolog, yet another form, contains possibilities for pride as well as shame—adolescent but also ideologically repressive sexual affects. And if the sexual politics of the poem are as convoluted as they seem, the male reader indeed must be positioned differently from the female ("maiden"). However, the male reader becomes somewhat of a problem if he is actually feminized—that is, figured allegorically as female for the purposes of concealing a male-to-male sexual act. Because readership was largely female in Wordsworth's day, the society of male writers—and Coleridge and Wordsworth can certainly be read as their own homoerotic society—thus trafficked homosexually (à la Irigaray [193]) in these women, whether inside or outside their poems (Koestenbaum also makes a point of this).

Remember that the boy remains apart from his "dame," acting out a conflict between recollection and expenditure without her, reproducing a typical domestic arrangement. The boy must waste to collect, an ambiguity conveyed by the poem's

very title. He must wreck to become rich, pull down to gather, destroy to enjoy. Though he seeks the utility of accumulation, he produces instead a futility of expenditure: an increasingly startling problem in the early years of the Industrial Revolution and corporate capitalism. This problem would, in part, goad the English romantics into reconstructing crucial myths: Cain, the fratricide, who kills to gain autonomy and is exiled; Prometheus, the rebel, who must recall the curse that was meant to bring down the despotic head; Pygmalion, the artist, chipping away the cold, excess stone to achieve the living ideal; Ahasuerus, the wanderer, condemned to homelessness, bearing his own forms of destruction.

The boy of "Nutting" is, perhaps, the capitalist who, despairing in his inability to decode all the partial flows of wealth (as in Deleuze and Guattari), withdraws from life after the crash of his resources. He invests far too much.

Language is violence upon nature, but does nature have to be figured as innocent? Perhaps the speaker must do so in order to make the act that much more appealing, and appalling. A female principle may be "both pivotal and underplayed" (Webster 57) in Wordsworth, and is perhaps ultimately "picturesque" (58), but this does not mean that *any* human principle has been emptied out of that bower, which the speaker of "Nutting" is, at the same time, careful to keep allegorized, and anxious to possess. The poem's self-awareness, disguising itself, like the speaker, thereby as a kind of innocence—a deceptive maneuver, of course—seduces. That the hazel, it seems, has never before been touched does not render it "virgin" unless the boy loads the rift beforehand with as much dispossessable meaning as possible.

Nutting Readers

The boy seems, for his own purposes, rather successful in doing so, yet he is bound not to persuade the silent companions he has brought along on his expedition—his imagined readers. One reason for his failure in establishing a community of violators is that his own subject is decisively split: into the I of the narration, that of past events, and of the intermediary existing, though hardly thriving, in the interstices of allegory and metaphor, the reader's solicitors. And if the speaker can be

said to carry within himself and deliver to the hazel the Oedipal triangle (frugal mother, absent father, castrating and castrated self), his companions may not be sure who is leading them into criminal complicity. And against whom—the father to be seduced and preemptively castrated? The speaker cannot force his way into the reader as a unified self, and this somewhat vitiates his potential.

Furthermore, where does he end up? Does he return to his “dame”? (One psychoanalytical reading, figuring her as mother, would likely disallow him from returning, except linguistically: to rehearse and rehearse his expectable act on the mossy couch of anamnesis.) He has become “rich beyond the wealth of kings” (l. 51) but is also deprived painfully of—what, precisely? His real life, which he can only recall from the shadowy position of a spirit? But if he never really had such a life, his is the most dastardly of crimes. Ferguson’s reading of an unstable message in the poem (70) is therefore understatement. The message is wholly literary, and wholly disturbing, one that can leave the reader as much dismayed and displaced as the nutting, nudded boy.

Though readers realize the multiplication of the speaking subject, and resist “Nutting” with their own histories,²⁸ they nevertheless may exploit the potentialities that its “merciless ravage” has afforded, drawing from the experience of revolutionized sensibilities the power to eventuate subversive, liberating, and motivating actions that are “voluptuous” (l. 24), like the speaker’s while he observes the “unvisited” hazel “with wise restraint” (l. 23). (“Voluptuous,” appropriately, marks another erotic enjambment.)

Here is the allegory of one possible reading: the poet, expecting to be read, pens the confession; and so readers, bringing the poem into consciousness, mobilizing the mechanisms of seduction and violation, seduce the poet into leaving behind tracings of the pen(is) to be followed—not so much back to their originator as to his narrator, upon whom he has apparently displaced his motivations. Readers, then, hearing from the woods the speaker’s admonishments to the maiden, themselves become that shadowy, feminized, allegorical figure vanishing into the poem by participating with the “spirit” that has been left there, and may experience, upon *reentering* “Nutting,” a “sudden happiness beyond all hope” (l. 29). This will not be some unpersuasive instance of the imitational fallacy,²⁹ but a

repetition of the literal silence of reading prior to consciousness of the poem's success-in-failure.

But to conclude might be to render "Nutting" metaphorically, myself, and cease for a moment the flow of narrative it has initiated and reiterated, to silence this brief supplement ("Wordsworth's 'Nutting' and the Violent End of Reading") to the brief supplement ("Nutting") to the Wordsworthian project (*The Recluse*). I offer a tripartite reply to the subjection fostered by the threesome, the "grotesque triangle,"³⁰ that is the seductive voice of Wordsworth's poem. "Nutting" is a misericord: a suspension of obligations (the boy's), a side chapel to the greater edifice of poetry (Wordsworth's), and a phallic, chivalrous weapon for delivering the coup-de-grâce to its fatally wounded subject—reading.