

Chapter Five

Elegizing John Wordsworth: Commemoration and Lyric

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... I think on thee
My Brother, and on all which thou hast lost.
Wordsworth, "When first I journeyed hither"

It need scarcely be said, that an Epitaph presupposes a
Monument, upon which it is to be engraven.
Wordsworth, "Essay Upon Epitaphs (I)"

I

William Wordsworth's "Character of the Happy Warrior" was once a popular, much anthologized poem in the English-speaking world, but it fell out of favor, with didactic and imperial poetry in general, long before the mid-twentieth century, with the result that only a couple of times in my life have I encountered in use the phrase that must once have been intoned by school-masters and echoed half-mockingly by their charges. The "Happy Warrior"

... fixes good on good alone, and owes
To virtue every triumph that he knows:
... Looks forward, persevering to the last,
From well to better, daily self-surpast. (33-34, 75-76)¹

"Character of the Happy Warrior" exemplifies not so much William Wordsworth's as Samuel Johnson's understanding of what an epitaph should do, namely tell about someone's character. The happy warrior, whose character the poem commemorates, is generally taken to be Horatio Nelson—"conspicuous object in a Nation's eye" (66)—and the poem to allude to the circumstances of his death (21 October 1805) in the Battle of Trafalgar. It was, however, written between December 1805 and January 1806, less than a year after the death (5-6

February 1805) of John Wordsworth, and certain lines seem to refer to the beloved younger brother of William and Dorothy, a man fated rather to be counted among those "left unthought-of in obscurity" (67).

Throughout the nineteenth century, Nelson belonged to the select group of Englishmen whose names could be expected to travel through time without an epitaph. "The bare name of such men," Johnson wrote, in *his* essay on epitaphs [1740], "answers every purpose of a long inscription." Few can aspire to such a place in collective memory, however, and as Johnson put it, "if men raised to reputation by accident or caprice, have nothing but their names engraved on their tombs, there is danger lest, in a few years, the inscription require an interpreter" (131). Johnson thought that lives distinguished by "private virtue"—i.e. those of the good but obscure—make the best subject for an epitaph: "virtue exerted in the same circumstances in which the bulk of mankind are placed, and which, therefore, may admit of many imitators" (135). Wordsworth's poem has a similar focus upon "private," or at least self-sufficient, virtue. The happy warrior is one

Who, whether praise of him must walk the earth
For ever, and to noble deeds give birth,
Or He must go to dust without his fame,
And leave a dead unprofitable name,
Finds comfort in himself and in his cause. (77–81)

If the happy warrior faces death free of self-doubt, the poet at least is of two minds about the eternal value of virtue kept hidden from all possible imitators. Nelson, should we suppose, gained an undying fame; John Wordsworth left a "dead unprofitable name." In fact, over time, on the question of a poem's responsibility to him or her who once bore a name, the surviving brother left his readers a rather more complex legacy.

The abradings of time, through Wordsworth's middle years, did not touch Nelson's fame—but they did alter the author's own understanding of the identity, if not the character, of his happy warrior. Six years after the poem's publication, information came to light in Southey's 1813 *Life of Nelson* about arbitrary and extra-legal executions of Italian Jacobins that Nelson had ordered carried out following a 1799 campaign against the French-supported republic in Naples. These actions were enough, in Wordsworth's opinion, to have compromised Nelson's character. Wordsworth told Isabella Fenwick in 1843, "I have not been able to connect [Nelson's] name with the poem as I could wish" (qtd. in Rudman 177).

And so Wordsworth tilted back to what must have been his earliest conception and interpretation of the poem: that it told about the qualities evinced in particular by his brother John during the terrible night in February 1805 when the *Earl of Abergavenny* sank off the coast of southern England. The character of such a man is that of one

... who, though thus endued as with a sense
And faculty for storm and turbulence,

Is yet a Soul whose master bias leans
To home-felt pleasures and to gentle scenes. (57–60)

The ultimate aim of John Wordsworth's East India company voyagings—finally as captain of a ship on the potentially very profitable Bengal–China route—had been to raise enough money to be able to retire to the Lakes with his brother and sister. John was the sort of man, his brother believed, who was above all disposed to those "home-felt pleasures" and "gentle scenes." The lines here imply that a faculty for storm and turbulence is grounded in a very different "master bias"; but in two of the elegiac poems William wrote for his brother in 1805, he represents John's character as simply meek and gentle, and leaves the paradox, or antithesis, be. If his family *had* ever had an epitaph engraved for John (they did not), the words "meek" and "gentle" may well have appeared in it.

Wordsworth's argument in the first "Essay Upon Epitaphs" (1810) is partly a continuation of the polemic in his 1800 Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* against the stylistic misjudgments of his predecessors.² He assumes, with Johnson, that the epitaph has a moral function. But he disapproves, for instance, of epitaphs organized by antithesis, or in which the deceased is personified and speaks in his or her own voice. He lauds plain speech, and sincerity. These stylistic quibbles—so they might seem—are grounded in a momentous philosophical difference. Johnson, in his *Lives of the Poets*, quoted Pope in observing that the lack of variety in funereal inscriptions might well be accounted for by the fact that "the greater part of mankind have no character at all." He meant they "have little that distinguishes them from others equally good or bad, and therefore nothing can be said of them which may not be applied with equal propriety to a thousand more."³ Wordsworth quoted, and then responded in the strongest terms, to the first part of this remark, which he thought unbecoming of a serious thinker: "The objects of admiration in human nature are not scanty, but abundant: and every man has a character of his own, to the eye that has skill to perceive it" (*Prose* II 56). The difference between these views—*most people have no character at all* versus *every man has a distinct character of his own*—can hardly be overstated. Johnson's conviction is pre-Romantic; Wordsworth's indignation makes him a modern preoccupied not only with an ethics of authenticity, but with the writer's responsibility vis-à-vis the representation of other lives.⁴

Hence the way in which William wrote about his brother John in the poems of 1805. William was caught in a bind of sorts. Though we may not much admire it in him, or in the poems touched by it, he was a moralist; he believed in the reality of "character" in Johnson's sense. Moreover, in the aftermath of John's death he took comfort from the proof given by various *Earl of Abergavenny* survivors of his brother's (good) character.

On the other hand, it was Wordsworth's conviction that every person, good, bad, or morally neutral, has "a character." Theorists of our own moment tend to avoid the problems associated with the word character—and all that it suggests

in its history about designation and legibility—by writing instead of “singularity.” Wordsworth did not shy away from “character,” but acknowledged repeatedly that a person’s “character” can never be simply transferred into the characters of inscription or recollection. He noted, for instance, the way that people’s recollections of the recently dead tend to mist over (“as a tree through a tender haze or a luminous mist” [*Prose* II 58]), or to go through, in Charles Lamb’s words, a “refinement.”⁵ And he faced outright one of the skeptical objections of modern times: that the epitaph, the funereal representation, can never be a “faithful image” of the departed one’s character:

Shall we say, then, that this is not truth, not a faithful image; and that, accordingly, the purposes of commemoration cannot be answered?—It *is* truth, and of the highest order . . . it is truth hallowed by love—the joint offspring of the worth of the dead and the affections of the living. (*Prose* II 58)

Few today are likely to be persuaded by the excessive vehemence or the grotesque abstraction of this metaphor. It is hard to see that so much is at stake in an epitaph. If it is elegy we are talking about, however, might we not even now find in ourselves resistance to the thought that in lyric “the purposes of commemoration cannot be answered”?

II

“I only looked for pain and grief,” composed between May and July 1805, is a lyric of ten ten-line verses rooted in the ballad stanza. The speaker tells of revisiting the place, a pass in the Lakeland hills between Grasmere and Patterdale, where William and his sister had bidden John farewell five years earlier.⁶ The parting, the recollection of that parting, the retrospective transformation of the meaning of that parting, and the revisiting of the “Parting-place” (line 84) are all taken up in this poem.

The seventh stanza recounts how a living man may in a moment be reduced to a proper name. It is not primarily the agency of the murderous ocean Wordsworth refers to here, though that is of course implied. It is rather the utterance that brings the news—a sentence or sentences containing the words “Sea, Ship, drowned, shipwreck”; and nestled within those the “single word” *drowned*—that for the one who hears the news cannot be taken back, or turned away, or got behind. These lines convey a dreadful immediacy, or something very close to immediacy: “all vanished in a single word.” So Wordsworth evokes the phenomenological reality of it. In real time, word of the sinking of the *Earl of Abergavenny* took six days to reach the family of the poet in Grasmere.

All vanished in a single word,
A breath, a sound, and scarcely heard.
Sea, Ship, drowned, shipwreck—so it came,

The meek, the brave, the good was gone;
He who had been our living John
Was nothing but a name. (65–70)

It is, of course, not in the nature of names to be singular. The English, at this time at any rate, had no aversion to the repetition of a small pool of Christian names. William, in his own generation and the ones immediately before and after, had no fewer than eight male relatives named John Wordsworth (including his older cousin, who had been the previous captain of the *Earl of Abergavenny*). One might take an austere philosophical comfort, with Derrida, in saying that name and man had in advance parted ways.⁷ But no one who speaks this verse, with its rhyme of “John” and “gone,” can entirely avoid or abstract William’s horror at the transformation of “living” name to nothing but name. “That was indeed a parting!” begins the eighth stanza (line 71), and one supposes it refers to the arrival of the news of John’s death; but then, with that information absorbed, one cannot help but take it to refer back to the parting at the pass to Patterdale.

What is invested in naming it a “Parting-place”? The speaker points to it as a “precious Spot”—and while it is of course not one of those places of intense childhood experience that we have come to know of as spots of time, it is certainly an example of what Geoffrey Hartman has called a Wordsworthian “memory-place.”⁸ William thought that his return to the spot might help him move through his “pain and grief” at John’s death. The “I” of the poem declares that in this place he has “found relief” (line 4). Whether we are to take it as general proof, or only individual testimony, the speaker is sure that “to pains / Like these, there comes a mild release” (lines 77–78).

Something of note in “I only looked for pain and grief” is its concluding allusion to a monument stone:

Well, well, if ever verse of mine
Have power to make his merits known,
Then let a monumental Stone
Stand here—a sacred Shrine;
And to the few who come this way,
Traveller or Shepherd, let it say,
Long as these mighty rocks endure,
Oh do not Thou too fondly brood,
Although deserving of all good,
On any earthly hope, however pure! (91–100)

Various commonplaces associated with “the monumental” run interference with any reader’s response. The first is the Horatian–Shakespearean, best known by various formulations in the latter’s sonnets (including “Your monument shall be my gentle verse, / Which eyes not yet created shall o’er-read, / And tongues to be your being shall rehearse . . .” [Sonnet 81]). Shakespeare seems to have had a pre-moral conception of the monument: that is, I discern none of those eighteenth-century concerns with *character* in it. Nor is there a hint of

Wordsworth's materialist-philosophical stickling about a monument being substrate to an epitaph. The verse itself is the Horatian-Shakespearean monument. A secondary—Ozymandian—commonplace associated with “the monumental” limits its reference to the generalized stone relicts doomed to be outlived by immortal verse.

Neither Horatian-Shakespearean nor Ozymandian monument is quite right in the Wordsworthian context. Where anything like a monument—a ruin, say—appears in his poetry, it belongs first and foremost to memory-place. A memory-place can never be considered apart from a particular person's psyche. A poem, however, as a species of archive, can be. (In Derrida's words, “There is no archive without a place of consignment, without a technique of repetition, and without a certain exteriority” [*Archive Fever* 11].) Sooner or later a Wordsworthian monument stands forth as substrate, as the stuff of rocks and “permanent things.” Without the psyche that first set it in a memory-place, that is, monument reverts to substrate. The five-year-old Wordsworth came across the name of a murderer preserved in “characters inscribed / On the green sod . . .”—a “monumental writing . . . engraven / In times long past, and still from year to year / By superstition of the neighborhood / The grass . . . cleared away . . . / The letters . . . all fresh and visible” (1805 *Prelude*; XI, lines 295–302). It was a monument kept up by the locals, Wordsworth says, but the poem's text passes over, hence erases, the name itself.

As for the concluding verse of “I only looked for pain and grief,” its mood is too provisional, barely even optative, for it to assert monumentality in the Horatian-Shakespearean sense. The speaker is all too aware of what a poet can and cannot achieve; even if his verse should have the power to make the dead man's merits known, even if it should have the longevity of “mighty rocks,” soon enough that spot in the Grasmere-Patterdale pass would have ceased to be a memory-place. Could a poet be more cautious about the limits of lyric deployed in service of commemoration?

Turning now to “Michael,” written in 1800, before Wordsworth began thinking essayistically about character in relation to epitaphic commemoration, what should we make of the sheep-fold the old man works at and then abandons? Is Michael's broken sheep-fold a monument? If it is, it has not been written upon; it does not carry an epitaph. Anyone travelling by, the narrator supposes, would see only substrate:

Nor should I have made mention of this Dell
But for one object which you might pass by,
Might see and notice not. Beside the brook
There is a straggling heap of unhewn stones! (14–17)

In a similar way, one might pass by another person and not notice he had a character. Nevertheless, that straggling heap of stones has the “exteriority” of archive; the people of the valley, including the narrator, see it and recall the story of the old man and his son.

Again, in Hartman's terms, the sheep-fold in its dell is a memory-place—in this instance, the memory-place of a community of people rather than of a lone person. Still, one could not confuse such a memory-place with a Derridean archive, lacking as it does both “place of consignment” and “technique of repetition.” It is the poem at last that turns memory-place into archive. The poem, moreover, writes an epitaph to the life of the shepherd Michael, a man whom many might have thought had “no character at all.” The poem, then, though it is not “engraven” in that substrate, makes a monument of a heap of stones. (That the physical monument or its exact location may never be found seems not to matter here; epitaphs from the classical period have survived the physical disintegration of the monuments upon which they were first carved.⁹)

In this poem, what one might be inclined to point to as monumental resides not precisely in the stones (the substrate) nor in the poem itself, but in the condition of signs themselves. As the narrative of the poem makes explicit, the building of the sheep-fold stands as a promise—“a covenant / 'Twill be between us” [424–45]—between father and son. The father makes a ritual of it by asking the son to lay the first rock, a corner-stone. The placement of the stone is a sign; the still-to-be-built sheep-fold is, for the two men, a place of consignment. The boy's laying of that stone, and the father's continued work on the fold in his son's absence, are both—to hold the term within J. L. Austin's original range of application—performative gestures.

The ruined sheep-fold, though, is the shell of a failed performative. It is an emblem of the “counter-spirit” of language. Precisely because signs are open to the non-signifying and the non-binding, they are vulnerable to that force or drive “unremittingly and noiselessly at work to derange, to subvert, to lay waste, to vitiate, and to dissolve,” as the third “Essay on Epitaphs” has it (*Prose* II 85). It is mindless repetition that Wordsworth is thinking of: the failure of witnessing, in which language reveals its own drive toward oblivion even before any physical destruction of the archive. Both the performative gesture of man and son, and the poem—“Michael”—archive of that (fictional) transaction, are vulnerable to what Derrida has called the “archiviolithic” tendency of the death drive.¹⁰ In a sense of the word, then, that pulls it back into an Ozymandian valence, the poem's very exposure makes it monumental.

The odd pitch of the final verse of “I only looked for pain and grief” can be attributed to the way that the speaker calls up the Horatian-Shakespearean sense of the monumental (“Your monument shall be my gentle verse . . .” etc.) with a tentativeness that does not promise much, while that half-hearted promise is linked in the same breath to a wish for the other, stony sort of monument. This wish he expresses as fiat: “let a monumental stone / Stand here . . .” (lines 93–94). But fiat or not, there is nothing performative about the conclusion to the poem. The inscription he formulates for this imaginary monument is a *memento mori*, not an epitaph as Wordsworth will later define that term, since it makes no attempt to represent John's character. Perhaps this monument, in its lack of representational ambition, makes itself less vulnerable to language's “counter-spirit”?

Where the poem does more work is in the attention it devotes to the things of the memory-place, things that designate associations not exactly private though perhaps secret, the psyche having found and retained meaning in proximities and connections between itself, the lost one, and the local contours and saliences of this earthly substrate. As in the other three or four elegiac poems he wrote for his brother, William never provides, beyond generalizations, anything like a novelistic image of John himself—his focus is instead on things associated in some way with John, or more precisely, with the neighborhood of his own connectedness to him.

There is a similar metonymic drift in a number of Wordsworth's best-known poems: the wall, single sheep, and hawthorn on the bluff above the crossroads in *The Prelude*; the wooden bowl at the spring next to Margaret's ruined cottage; thorn and pond and hill of moss in "The Thorn." These secret crossings of meaning are no more enduring than the life of the one who keeps faith with them. Translated into verse they become archives, certainly; but this transformation means precisely that they pass beyond the jurisdiction of individual memorial or recollection. A fragment from one of Wordsworth's notebooks of 1798–1799 sets, however unfixedly, the word "memorial" against "monument":

... oftentimes I had burst forth
In verse which with a strong and random light
Touching an object in its prominent parts
Created a *memorial* which to me
Was all sufficient, and, to my own mind
Recalling the whole picture, seemed to speak
An universal language. Scattering thus
In passion many a desultory sound,
I deemed that I had adequately clothed
Meanings at which I had hardly hinted, thoughts
And forms of which I scarcely had produced
A *monument* and arbitrary sign. (*Prelude* 163; my italics)

As Armytage in "The Ruined Cottage" puts it, reflecting on the grown-over walls of Margaret's former abode:

... we die, my Friend,
Nor we alone, but that which each man loved
And prized in his peculiar nook of earth
Dies with him or is changed, and very soon
Even of the good is no memorial left. (68–72)

Even if it were possible to find some way of archiving the particularities of memory-place, that which made it a "memorial" would not survive the translation.

Wordsworth's perfunctory effort in the 1805 "To the Daisy" to imagine his brother as a genius of the shore, a version of Lycidas ("The Birds shall sing, and Ocean make / A mournful murmur for *his* sake..." [53–54]) involves an

acceptance of the erasure of nearly all the distinguishing marks of his brother's *character*, other than to note that he was silent, meek, gentle, sweet, and (in William and Dorothy's opinion) intrinsically unsuited to the sailor's life. So far as the speaker acknowledges the singularity of this man's life, it is by alluding instead to that which he "loved / and prized in his peculiar nook of earth..." This one idiosyncratic love—for the daisy—did not die with John but "is changed" because he communicated it to a brother who shared that love.

Wordsworth was loyal to the eighteenth-century discourse of morality and character, but had in view at the same time a modern sense of responsibility to singular being, and of the absolute limitations of representation. Moral discourse deals in propositional statement, not suggestion or intimation, since it aims, as Wordsworth puts it, to "make [its object's] merits [or its 'fate'] known" ("I only looked for pain and grief," line 92). It commemorates character. So: John Wordsworth was brave, meek, and good ("I only looked for pain and grief"). Or: He satisfied all claims of duty, and was, in the hour of crisis as well as for six weeks after his death, unforced by wind or wave to quit the ship for which he died ("To the Daisy"). We can only adjudicate the success or failure of such representations by historical criteria. Eighteenth-century thinking about monuments and epitaphs could never have conceived of a form that aimed to do justice to the singularity of a life. Post-Romantic thinking cannot think of a form that would represent such singularity without traducing it.

There was more than self-satisfaction or hard-heartedness in William's 1845 reply by letter to a cousin who had informed him that the stone that had been laid on John's grave in the church where he was buried was no longer there, and that the grave was now unmarked. "I should be somewhat more desirous of this being done [i.e., a new stone or plaque being placed]," he wrote, "if my own poems had not widely spread the knowledge of my poor Brother's fate" (qtd. in Barker 329). Wordsworth's phrasing is reminiscent of what he used in "I only looked for pain and grief..."—only here it is much more confident. Any tentativeness about the commemorative power of lyric is gone. Either that, or—if we think back to the "memorial"/"monument" distinction Wordsworth had drawn as a young man—by this late moment in his life he had resigned himself to the power of the arbitrary sign to lay waste to what it commemorates, for signification to suffer dissolution and derangement.

That is why in the 1845 letter he seems proprietorial *and* cavalier. In responsibility to the maritime churchyard where his brother's body lay, William comported himself like the Self whose figure Derrida sketches in his exposition of Abraham and Torok's cryptonymy: "The Self: a cemetery guard... [who] uses all his knowledge of the grounds to turn visitors away" ("Fors" xxxv). Certainly, Wordsworth's psyche had grounds extending into all manner of places, some of which he made no claims to oversee:

... I do not doubt
That in this later time, when storm and rain
Beat on my roof at midnight, or by day

When I am in the woods, unknown to me
The workings of my spirit thence are brought. (*Prelude* XI 385–89)

The “spots of time” in the *Prelude* have often been read as figures of psychic continuity, but one or two of them—particularly the account of the wait at the crossroads in the days before his father’s death at the Christmas holidays—tell of discontinuity, self-division, of an otherness within but simultaneously exterior to the self.

“Everything works against trauma in Wordsworth. . . .”¹¹ Suppose that Hartman had said “in the Wordsworths”? I am thinking of the bond of William (b. 1770), Dorothy (b. 1771) and John (b. 1772), who became especially close in the time following their mother’s (1778) and then father’s (1783) deaths.¹² We know that William’s word-rivers flowed through all things but his parents’ deaths. When John, “the silent poet,” died, it would have magnified the catastrophe for Dorothy and William if John’s silence had been, in Abraham and Torok’s term, a “crypt” built out of one or both of those parents’ deaths, and brother and sister had had some unutterable share in it. Derrida wrote of the Wolf Man: “He will die with or through the crypt within him” (“Fors” xlv). John must have seemed to go *through* a silence of that sort. Laurie Johnson muses about what it could even mean to share a crypt, to share an unutterable woe (below, 117). Most likely everything about the Wordsworth siblings indeed worked against trauma or crypt. There is, though, the little-known poem “When first I journeyed hither” [1800–1804] in which William reconstructs the spot of time associated with his father’s death. A sunlit version of the sheep and wall and hawthorn configuration, this fir-grove spot, through which the pacing John had once “found . . . an easy line / Along a natural opening” (56–59) becomes a memorial of the absent young mariner. It is already strange, of course, that the poem “murmurs with a sea-like sound” (111), that it portends John’s death, but stranger still how it re-imagines weakly—by another displacement or prosthesis—the originally displaced scene, and then sets the “indistinguishable sympathies” of older and younger brother to “mingling” there (114–15).

III

Any sequence of elegiac stanzas is a lyric; that is, a peculiar sort of archive. It is not a “memorial” (the secret crossing of loss and place), since a technique of repetition belongs to it. And though it shares some of the qualities of an epitaph, as Wordsworth implies in the 1845 letter to his cousin, a lyric poem answers the purposes of commemoration only in the most limited sense.¹³

If the singularity of a life can never be captured in a poem, then lyric will never serve the post-Romantic purposes of commemoration. What is lyric good for then? And of what value is the concept of the singular life to anyone thinking about lyric poems? What is the basis of my unshakable conviction that certain lyric poems—or more precisely, the speaking of them, and so their iterability, the possibility of their instantiation—can be of value to those who mourn, or

have mourned, or are yet to mourn? The value of the lyric poem in our time has to do with the dreadful and unavoidable intimacy of iterability and mindless repetition, of—in Derrida’s formulation—archive and death-drive. The modern soul or self or psyche understands itself to be unique, hence inaccessible to characterization, hence destined to be covered in night.

The term elegy misleads us. No lyric is ever the exclusive record of the experience of a lone, punctual subjectivity, but is rather a script for speaking that travels across the bodies and psyches of generations. Lyric of any sort becomes much more plausible in our own cultural moment if we understand that its power of “mild release” is in essence the power of iterability, which is related as well to the iterability of individual words, and so to change across historical and personal time. (“Elegy,” however many hundreds of millions of iterations ago, once referred to a Roman meter, not a sub-genre of lyric.)

Read in a post-Romantic light, every lyric announces a double fate. Whoever speaks it acknowledges failure, in that at best the representations of the poet leave an archive, register, or memorandum—in Derrida’s unlovely phrase, a “mnemotechnical supplement” (*Archive Fever* 11)—of love. Perhaps, in the poems of a Wordsworthian culture, the lyric will often be an archive of memory-place, another creature of love. And whoever takes up the poem to speak it avows as well, through the consignations and differentiations available to love, a willingness to repeat.

A contemporary reader of an elegiac lyric *cannot* without self-distortion simply echo the “I” of Shakespeare’s sonnet 123, who outright defies the power of time: “No, time, thou shalt not boast that I do change . . . Thy registers and thee I both defy” (1, 9). The denial of all need for *hypomnēma*, of all archives and their fixities, of their characterizations, of all need to preserve a record of love looks more like an embrace of the inhuman than of transcendent love. A commitment both to singularity and to being numerous makes the monumental poem (in the Horatian–Shakespearean sense) an impossibility for post-Romantic poet and reader.¹⁴ Singular “character” cannot be represented by the poem; only in the body and mind of each reader can it, for a time, give its inflections to a spoken instantiation of the poem. The perpetuation of lyric speech always involves a sort of over-reading, as an overlay of reader upon reader, instantiation upon instantiation.

Mourning, more complex than grief or pain, names a predicament of representation and repetition, of memory and fidelity. We who speakingly or unspeakingly mourn our losses—the Kind, as Wordsworth puts it in his closing to the Peele Castle elegy—are beings of both body and mind: psyches. There is indeed a genetic and generic sameness about us (we are countable, subjectable, subsumable). But each is, has become, different, singular, other. Speech and every mode of representation, as we know, belong to collectivity and technicity. But lyric, because of the complexity of its interface between text and speech and psyche, between that which mindlessly repeats and that which is lost without trace, is *as a form* particularly hospitable to the antinomies of mourning.

It is not coincidental that the work of mourning and forgiveness in the modern city also resists any commemoration that might be seen as finished or complete. As Werner Hamacher points out, all political theorizings concerning "a society of respect for others" must build on the Kantian groundwork: "Autonomy and, with it, dignity are for Kant the irreducible minimal determination of man as a social being universal in his respective singularity" (311). Hamacher points to the inescapable circle, paradox, or aporia in this conception: "The imperative of autonomy is . . . by no means the fact that a self has its own law, but the stipulation that, in order to be a self, it must first give itself as something not yet given: that it must give itself as another and give the other along with itself" (310). This imperative Hamacher calls *autonomization*, and he insists, without diminishing the difficult implications of it for politics, that the "sole principle of [modern] democracy" can only be "active respect for the autonomization of all others" (319). Without this active respect for a never finished process, democracies live off such limited historical accomplishments as the slow reforms that brought about universal enfranchisement. Without this active respect, democracies move sooner or later toward a politics of coercion, toward a generalized application of certain accountings and characterizations of virtue: happy warrior, grateful citizen, and so on. Jonathan Hall describes two memorial statues in Beirut. One, commemorating the struggle for independence, he calls a "classical depiction of citizenship" that represents the "universalized values" considered essential for "founding a modern nation-state" (49, above). The second—recently displaced by the former—represents two women, of different ethnicities, "facing each other, and holding out their hands toward one another" (49, above). Its iconography, Hall writes, suggests that "the work of mourning . . . seems endless, opening out into infinity" (52, above). In a city scarred by war, the second statue expresses, as Hamacher puts it, an active respect for the autonomization of others, so a hope for the future of the city (311).

Eighteenth-century discussion about whether most men have "a character," and thus are entitled to certain forms of representation, in life and in death, was not unrelated to the demand for universal enfranchisement (recall Thomas Gray's reflections on the poor, unlettered dead of a country churchyard, the "mute, inglorious Milton[s]" but also the fanatic Cromwells). It is clear that Wordsworth's thinking about commemoration, which follows in this tradition, looks ahead to debates about the aspirations and aporetics of modern democracy. I would argue, though, that his conception of the epitaph in the end bows to certain impasses of representation in a way that lyric need not.

The reader who takes up a lyric poem in speech, instantiates it, inhabits it for a time. But it too inhabits him, or her. Derrida, in his preface to *The Wolf Man's Magic Word* as in the late essay on Nancy, circles around figures—hidden places in the psyche, prostheses or grafts in "the heart of an organ" (xiii)—that are bound up, Miller suggests, with a metaphysics of enislement (19, above). Miller takes us through Derrida's exposition of "indirect appresentation" (14, above) showing again why Husserl's radical analysis was a point of beginning for deconstruction. In lyric—in certain Celan poems that he read

repeatedly (*Sovereignties in Question*)—Derrida found a literary form as rigorous as "indirect appresentation." Between the one speaking the poem and the "I," and between the one speaking the poem and the unreachable "you," lies an "unbridgeable abyss": but also, as most basic possibility, *se toucher toi*. Hamacher's "active respect" for the autonomization of others is politically corollary to the phenomenology of "indirect appresentation," since both instance what we might call Derrida's ethical imperative: "to watch over the other's alterity" (qtd. in 14, above).

IV

A lyric makes it possible for someone speaking the poem to attest to the way that the difference of singular loss works through speech. To give a famous example:

She lived unknown, and few could know
When Lucy ceased to be;
But she is in her grave, and oh!
The difference to me. ("Song," 9–12)

All the last line does—it's a matter of the way meter and rhythm pull against each other—is make you aware of the texture of "difference" in your mouth. It's an ordinary word; here it feels a little strange.

Or consider these simple, seemingly transparent lines (again from "I only looked for pain and grief"). It takes a certain focus of address, and awareness of context, to speak them with emotional plausibility:

That was indeed a parting! oh,
Glad am I, glad that it is past;
For there were some on whom it cast
Unutterable woe. (71–74)

One must (as I read it) fetch out *deed* from *indeed*, and the first *it*; and not lay too much of a stress on "I" in the second line. Then there is "unutterable," which threatens to collapse its line into something less than six syllables. Any fully articulated uttering of the word will be an affirmation of sorts. That is all the quatrain asks; but it delivers as much as any lyric can. The quatrain, unlike comparable lines in "Elegiac Stanzas," carries no claims, purchased by "retroactive falsification," about earlier states (Levinson 110).¹⁵ What it says about parting can be left unuttered, but not in that way ever eluded. The first parting is given meaning by the second parting: in *deed* it was a parting (we had not expected it to be the final one). "I" am glad—not that he has departed this life—but that the pain and grief of the *second* parting is past. *That* one: pointed to by the indicator "that." But the second parting (of name and living man) makes the first one also *the* parting.

No elegy is indeed a poem of parting until the one speaking it has undergone a similar parting, and the whole pitch and register of the iteration is changed. Glad—relatively—that it is past; glad to be speaking the poem, even as it points back to the parting; glad—relatively—not to be sunk in unutterable woe, as Dorothy was for a time.

In "Elegiac Stanzas," we find something other than a juggernaut of represented subjectivity¹⁶; and in the minor elegies for John too something other than a private expression of loss. Interpretive accretions aside, any lyric is primarily an artifact that extends hospitality to the speaker who utters it, who pronounces its words, who differentially sounds the sequences of syllables in its sentences in order to give it this particular instantiation in speech. In turn, the lyric allows the contemporary speaker—you or I or whoever next takes it up to speak—to acknowledge his or her finitude with respect to language and representation and communicability.

The following lines from "I only looked for pain and grief" picture the mourner's fidelity freed from the stringencies of representation, but open to the always incrementally different possibilities of lyric instantiation:

Here did we stop, and here looked round
While each into himself descends
For that last thought of parting Friends
That is not to be found. (41–44)

The "thought of parting friends" runs both ways, since the genitive is both objective and subjective: whatever has been forgotten or lost, or was never to be found—friends in one another's mind's eye, friends' thoughts communicated or not—there is a reciprocity in the parting, and an affirmation.

The private disaster of the "parting . . . indeed" folds back into itself this "last thought." To leave that thought be, to allow the parting of lived moment and recollected sign, to let it go without letting go one's fidelity to it, involves an affirmation of the possibility of newness in repetition.

It is an affirmation potentially to be taken on by anyone who speaks this lyric; and to return to my opening paragraphs, any such instantiation of the poem's speech carries a value truer to the post-Romantic moment than, say, the politically unconscious driftings through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries of certain phrases from "Character of the Happy Warrior," whose character most men were said to lack, though it was hoped that collectively they might somehow rise to it through imitation. That poem, like any other, is rooted in its own iterability, in the technique of repetition belonging to it. Iterability, the incrementalities of alteration, variation through repetition: these are lyric principles that answer the purposes not of men and less-than-men rising into prescribed and universally celebrated character, but of numerousness and of numerous discourses crossed by the vapour-cloud traces of singularity.

An "elegiac stanza" is a room through which the finitude of any speaker may momentarily pass. It may well also serve, as briefly, the purposes of commemoration: "Not without hope we suffer and we mourn" ("Elegiac

Stanzas," 60). Absolutely singular loss, absorbed so easily otherwise as one more drop in the sea of human mortality, asserts itself most strongly not as autobiographical testimony but as words repeatable, utterable, by whoever takes up these lines, addressed no longer to

. . . Beaumont, Friend! Who would have been the Friend,
If he had lived, of Him whom I deplore . . . ("Elegiac Stanzas," lines 41–42)

but always swerving instead toward the third who is the future of the poem.¹⁷ It is the way of lyric to offer unanticipated hospitalities to speakers, to contexts unforeseen, and to thoughts of friends unpredictably returning.

Notes

1. All citations and line numbers from Wordsworth's poetry other than *The Prelude* are from *William Wordsworth: The Major Works*. Ed. Stephen Gill. Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2000.

2. The first "Essay Upon Epitaphs" was printed in Feb., 1810, in Coleridge's periodical *The Friend*, and then appended to Wordsworth's long poem *The Excursion* when it was published in 1814. The second and third Essays on Epitaphs were not published until 1876.

3. *Lives*, iii. 263–64. Cited in Owen and Smyser's edition of Wordsworth's prose, vol. II, 103.

4. The "ethics of authenticity" is Charles Taylor's phrase.

5. Alethea Hayter notices the phrase in a letter of condolence. John's death, Lamb wrote to William, "always occurs to my mind with something like a feeling of reproach, as if we ought to have been nearer acquainted, and as if there had been some incivility shown him by us, or something short of that respect which we now feel; but it is always a feeling, when people die, and I should not foolishly offer a piece of refinement, instead of sympathy, if I knew any other way of making you feel how little like indifferent his loss has been to us" (qtd. in Hayter 169–70).

6. Dorothy wrote in her *Journal*, 29 Sep. 1800: "John left us. Wm. and I parted with him in sight of Ulswater" (qtd. in Gill 715).

7. The name is already an empty marker, and hence "races toward death even more quickly than we do, we who naively believe that we bear it. It is in advance the name of a dead person" (*The Work of Mourning* 130).

8. In a 1994 interview with Cathy Caruth, Hartman spoke about how the memory-place is both a spot discernible within but also constitutive of "a temporal consciousness" (310): "That is, the reflective moment is introduced in all its dimensions. And there is recovery. For the recovery to be effective, salutary, it has to be associated with place . . . So the recovery, the retrieval process, insofar as it can be called healing or therapeutic, involves the notion of place, the image of a power place" (*The Wordsworthian Enlightenment* 310).

9. The European literary "inscription" tradition was premised upon the entirely plausible fiction of text surviving the monument upon which it was engraven. See Hartman, "Wordsworth, Inscriptions and Romantic Nature Poetry."

10. Derrida on Freud's death drive: "This three-named drive is mute. It is at work, but since it always operates in silence, it never leaves any archives of its own . . . it not only incites forgetfulness, amnesia, the annihilation of memory, as *mnēmē* or *anamnēsis*, but also commands the radical effacement, in truth the eradication, of that which can never be reduced to *mnēmē* or to *anamnēsis*, that is, the archive, consignment, the documentary or monumental apparatus as hypomnema, mnemotechnical supplement or representative, auxiliary or memorandum" (*Archive Fever* 10–11).

11. "A gentle shock of mild surprise" became Hartman's formulation for understanding how, as he put it in the interview with Caruth, "everything works against trauma in Wordsworth, yet the basis of the trauma is there" (304).

12. Eldest brother Richard and youngest brother Christopher were outliers in the family romance.

13. Miller argues that all poems, since they survive their authors, are "epitaphic" (*The Linguistic Moment* 108–13).

14. The phrase, of course, is George Oppen's. See his poem "Of Being Numerous" [1968].

15. According to Hayter, William and Dorothy did have a brief meeting with John in London in 1802. Arguably, then, there may be a mild "retroactive falsification" in this poem too.

16. "Juggernaut of subjectivity" is Levinson's term (115).

17. For a discussion of the third who is the future of the poem, see my "Apostrophe, or the Lyric Art of Turning Away."