

WORDSWORTH, WITTGENSTEIN, AND THE RECONSTRUCTION OF THE EVERYDAY

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I.

The idea that poetry just might be more philosophical than philosophy itself marks thinking about poetry and poetics in the Romantic tradition almost singularly. Poetry for the early German Romantics, for instance, speaks to and actually dissolves philosophical problems better than philosophy can; it outdoes philosophy in a certain ability of “thinking.” For the Jena Romantics, it is a matter of the reversal of the genres in the ancient quarrel: poetry, in the broad sense, can for someone like Friedrich Schlegel actually do or enact something in the world of ideas that philosophy simply cannot, and philosophy thus ultimately takes second place to the Romantic poeticizing of the world. “Where philosophy stops, poetry has to begin,” he announces.¹ Early German Romantic literature not only comes into hitherto unimaginably close contact and tangled concourse with philosophical thought. In works like the *Athenäum Fragments*, it also usurps philosophy’s claim to the practice of what can go by the name of the properly philosophical. Around 1800, at least in German literary circles, it turns out that poetry can be more philosophical than philosophy itself.

While the English Romantic period is by no means characterized by the same intimate and intense intermingling of genres and traditions, British Romantics also mark and measure their literary enterprises as specifically philosophical achievements. One need not dwell on the exemplary yet unique case of Coleridge to confirm such a claim. Even in a text like Wordsworth’s 1800 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, which itself aggressively refuses the title of a philosophical defense, we find descriptions of the appeal to what Wordsworth famously calls the “real language of men” like the

following: “Accordingly such a language arising out of repeated experience and regular feelings is a more permanent and a far more philosophical language than that which is frequently substituted for it by Poets.”² Among the 1802 additions to the document, we find defenses of his poetic practice of this kind: “Aristotle, I have been told,” writes Wordsworth, “has said, that Poetry is the most philosophic of all writing: it is so: its object is truth, not individual and local, but general, and operative” (*PW* 139). For Wordsworth in the Preface, to write poetry in the “real” (*PW* 118) or the “very” (*PW* 131) language of men is ultimately and perhaps paradoxically to make a claim to the reemergence of the philosophical impulse. Thus contrary to certain clichés about Wordsworth, it seems that the poet of *Lyrical Ballads* is actually invested in the resuscitation of a project he chooses to keep calling or at least keep marking specifically with the term “philosophy,” and this project in turn is intimately linked to the reintroduction of “real” language into his poetic practice. Despite the fact that Coleridge predicts that Wordsworth will be “admitted as the first & greatest philosophical Poet” and instinctively foresees that he is capable of producing the “first genuine philosophic poem,” he at the same time questions and protests against Wordsworth’s vision of writing verse in the “real language of men.”³ It is the point, rhetorically, in relation to *Lyrical Ballads* about which Coleridge is most firm, hostile, aggressive, and expansive in his later meditations in *Biographia Literaria* when he considers the principles Wordsworth outlined in the Preface from his own avowedly “philosophical” point of view:

My own difference from certain supposed parts of Mr. Wordsworth’s theory ground themselves on the assumption, that his words had been rightly interpreted, as purporting that the proper diction for poetry in general consists altogether in a language taken, with due exceptions, from the mouths of men in real life, a language which actually constitutes the natural conversation of men under the influence of natural feelings. (*BL* 2: 42)

The connection between philosophy and real or everyday language thus unconditionally belongs to Wordsworth’s early poetic vision alone. Real language for Wordsworth simply is “more permanent” and “more philosophical.”

My interest in Wordsworth’s comparatively quiet or indistinct dialogue with philosophical thinking leads me to turn neither to studies tracing the varied philosophic influences on his poetics nor to those examining the influence of his collaborator Coleridge on his early poetic theory and practice, but instead to a philosopher who, very much like Wordsworth, gives almost exclusive and even obsessive attention to everyday language—that is, who, like Wordsworth, believed that if there is something like real philosophical thinking, it can only come from a kind of deliberate rescue of ordinary language and the everyday sense of our words.⁴ For there is a deep and rarely noted conceptual affinity between Wordsworth’s conviction in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* that poetry should be written in “language really used by men” (*PW* 123) or that the poet is “a man speaking to men” (*PW* 138) and Wittgenstein’s overarching desire in *Philosophical Investigations* to “bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use.”⁵ For both the poet and the philosopher, our language somehow has been led astray (both Wordsworth and Wittgenstein charge the opposition with linguistic extravagance—“inane phraseology” [*PW* 123], Wordsworth calls it), and thus the task is to lead it back to what one calls “real” and the other “everyday” language. What will occupy me in this essay is the epistemological priority both Wordsworth and Wittgenstein in this way assign to

everyday language; I will be wondering throughout how it turns out in both *Lyrical Ballads* and *Philosophical Investigations* that the everyday *is* the philosophical, and how the singular attention to everyday language in both the case of the poet and the philosopher culminates in what one could call a novel epistemology. And one of my implicit claims will be that we can usefully read Wordsworth alongside Wittgenstein in this way, that is, that investigating this conceptual affinity—this valorization of everyday language in relation to the possibility of philosophical thinking—is not an irrelevant theoretical stretch of some kind but that it can reveal something about Wordsworth’s early poetic project and vision, about the significance of the concept of the everyday in Wittgenstein’s later philosophy, about the interrelationship between poetry and philosophy in the Romantic era, and about the ways in which through new models of reading literature and philosophy might be brought into forms of interrelation today.

Recently, Michael Fried has made recourse to an analogous mode or model of reading, one in which the work of the philosopher is asked to shed light on the stakes of a work of art and in which that work of art in turn brings into relief the contours of a philosophical project—in which the philosopher and artist become mutually illuminating, in other words—in his *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*. In his reading of the work of the contemporary photographer Jeff Wall, for example, Fried overlays Wittgenstein’s thinking about the category of the everyday with Wall’s work in what the artist calls “near documentary,” and the conceptual encounter yields a subtle and engaging account of both Wittgenstein’s complex notion and the artist’s own commitment to the everyday as an aesthetic category.⁶ Fried invokes the distinction between a usual, commonplace conception of the “everyday” and Wittgenstein’s distinctive philosophical conception of the “everyday” to demonstrate that for both the philosopher and the artist, the appeal to the everyday involves an essential process of reconstruction and recomposition, one through which the everyday begins to come forward not as ordinary at all but as strange and unfamiliar—as once again capable of making an impression. Wall’s participation in an aesthetic of the everyday involves not “straight” photography (or unrehearsed documentary snapshots) but, like Wittgenstein’s, a careful, painstaking, and in Wall’s case nearly unheard-of process of the reconstruction of everyday experience. Verisimilitude, to be sure, is not the stake in Wall’s project; the point is not the accurate repetition or mimicking of something. Instead, labor and memory for Wall work to recapture or recompose what one feels has vanished. Although just one often takes months to shoot, some of Wall’s photographs might be taken for snapshots, or perhaps it is important to say that part of their aesthetic involves that possible confusion between the artful and the unpremeditated. And like Wittgenstein’s philosophical conception of the everyday, Wall’s second-order, recomposed, revisited everyday finally makes its world emerge not as familiar but as unexpected, “surprising and new,” as Wall puts it, or as something that again can be confronted and recognized.⁷ What Fried’s encounter with Wall and Wittgenstein highlights, then, is the way in which the everyday as an aesthetic category is essentially tied to making what Wittgenstein calls “life itself” again available for contemplation, and how the labor of making that “life” again available entails not a mirroring but a deliberative reassemblage.⁸

None of these concerns is foreign to how Wordsworth envisions his early poetic project. In his appeal to a poetics grounded in the “real” or the “very” language of men, Wordsworth—like Wittgenstein or Wall—is not interested in the orchestration of a verisimilitude but, instead, in creating an image in verse of both life and language as at once untouched, unmarred and yet remarkable. Coleridge simply termed it a

gift for “giv[ing] the charm of novelty to things of every day” (*BL* 2: 7). Andrew Bennet has, less simply, called it an invitation in Wordsworth’s poetry to be “newly ignorant” or “newly unknowing.”⁹ One only has to register the “sound” of the everyday in both *Lyrical Ballads* and *Philosophical Investigations* to register how language works in both sets of texts to startle us into a revelatory ignorance. As critics of both long have noted, many of Wittgenstein’s hypothetical games and dialogues, like Wordsworth’s poems, are very strange, strikingly unusual and even obscure. Language in *Lyrical Ballads* and *Philosophical Investigations* can be completely common and yet completely disconcerting. So that it turns out in both sets of texts that the appeal to an aesthetic of the everyday results in a revisiting or a recomposing of the everyday that finally sounds the tone of the unexpected.

Readers of Wordsworth have often taken his conception of “real language” to be either a self-evident or an ideological one; they have not been open to taking Wordsworth seriously when he writes that “real” language is “far more philosophical” than poetic language; and they have too frequently reduced the arguments of the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* to easy clichés about spontaneity, powerful feeling, and Romantic expression. Reading Wordsworth alongside Wittgenstein on the topic of everyday or ordinary language, this essay seeks to establish that for Wordsworth as for Wittgenstein, the everyday is not as a site of unreflective immediacy or “spontaneity” but instead is a second-order of meaning that, through the work of verse or philosophy, must be reassembled and recomposed. I hope to show how this recomposition or re-sounding of the everyday strikes the notes of a language that is—for Wordsworth as for Wittgenstein—always “far more philosophical” than any other.

II.

The question of how to read *Philosophical Investigations*—how to make sense of Wittgenstein’s philosophical “reminders” and understand what they are to be reminders of—is a pressing and real one, for Wittgenstein does not indicate his guiding problematics in exposition in any way. Following Stanley Cavell, we might term this an aspect of the problem of the text’s *availability*.¹⁰ The *Investigations’* many games, monologues, and dialogues—some surreal in their simplicity—give the impression that their significance or meaningfulness cannot be accessed or made more distinct by coming to arrive at any further sense of *depth* in the text. Wittgenstein validates this impression in the *Investigations* when he writes in the following way about what we might call his method or his way of proceeding: “It is [...] essential to our investigation that we do not seek to learn anything *new* by it. We want to *understand* something that is already in plain view. For *this* is what we seem in some sense not to understand” (§89). Thus, what Wittgenstein says throughout *Philosophical Investigations* is undisguised, “in plain view,” exact and explicit. The text’s hypothetical games, too, are similarly plain and utterly lucid: pretend two men are building a house, say you are sent shopping for apples, imagine someone says such and such. Everything lies in the open, bare and exposed. This is a declared goal of Wittgenstein’s—to “disperse the fog” (§5)—and the demand for clarity or what he calls “perspicuous representation” (§122) in fact acts as a sort of compass for his voices throughout. The demand for a clear view is even raised at one point to the status of a “Weltanschauung,” for it distinguishes and sets apart “how we look at matters” (§122).

Analogously, the poems collected in *Lyrical Ballads*, despite their “naked and simple style” (*PW* 145), are not an easy group of texts. They too are affected by and historically have been marked by the problem of availability. While Wordsworth

writes in the Preface to the collection that without a moral purpose he would be no Poet (*PW* 124), the poems' "purposes" are often deeply obscure. That is, while many of the *Lyrical Ballads* in essence seem didactic, give the recognizable sense that they are to be centrally moral, the actual moral thrust of many of the collection's poems—some decidedly bizarre, like "The Idiot Boy"—often seems very far out of reach. The nakedness and accessibility of Wordsworth's sheer style, on the other hand, has been consistently remarked on ever since Matthew Arnold famously characterized Wordsworth's poetry as having no style—no *literary* style, as if Nature took the pen right out of the poet's hand.¹¹ Coleridge, for instance, writes of Wordsworth's blank verse that no ear "could suspect, that these sentences were ever printed as metre"; M. H. Abrams of Wordsworth's "austere naturalness"; Paul de Man of lines "audacious in the sparseness of their means"; Geoffrey Hartman of their "weightless" or "unremarkable" quality; and David Perkins of the way in which "artlessness" is precisely the pleasure of the poetry.¹² Wordsworth's language, readers note, often seems to be transparent, and we are as unaware of it "as we should be of the glass in a window."¹³ Already in 1825 Hazlitt comments with characteristic incisiveness on this "unaccountable mixture of seeming simplicity and real abstruseness in *Lyrical Ballads*."¹⁴ A noteworthy point of comparison between *Lyrical Ballads* and *Philosophical Investigations*, then, lies in the fact that both Wordsworth and Wittgenstein declaredly and emphatically place meaning in plain sight—and yet in the end one feels it is hidden from view.

Wittgenstein's philosophical notes and reminders, like many of Wordsworth's poems, stage the intercourse of voices. People *speak* in both of these sets of texts. Both are structured throughout as scenes of discourse—interchanges, crossings, and confrontations. An exemplary exchange in the *Investigations* that makes vivid this characteristic vocal give-and-take, for instance, runs thus:

"But if the concept 'game' is without boundaries in this way, you don't really know what you mean by a 'game'."—When I give the description "The ground was quite covered with plants," do you want to say that I don't know what I'm talking about until I can give a definition of a plant?

An explanation of what I meant would be, say, a drawing and the words "The ground looked roughly like this." Perhaps I even say: "It looked *exactly* like this."—Then were just *these* blades of grass and *these* leaves there, arranged just like this? No, that is not what it means. And I wouldn't accept any picture as the exact one in *this* sense. (§70)

In a reading that elucidates this essentially dialogic structure of Wittgenstein's text, Cavell argues that vocal exchanges and struggles of this kind represent a self's dramatized grappling with its own inclinations and temptations in thought, turning Wittgenstein's inquiry at every step into a form of heightening self-scrutiny and self-confrontation. About this form of the *Investigations*, which he specifically places within the genre of confession, Cavell writes:

Inaccessible to the dogmatics of philosophical criticism, Wittgenstein chose confession and recast his dialogue. It contains what serious confessions must: the full acknowledgement of temptation ("I want to say..."; "I feel like saying..."; "Here the urge is strong...") and a willingness to correct them and give them up ("In the everyday use..."; "I impose a requirement which does not meet my real need"). (The

voice of temptation and the voice of correctness are the antagonists in Wittgenstein's dialogues.) In confessing you do not explain or justify, but describe how it is with you. And confession, unlike dogma, is not to be believed but tested, and accepted or rejected. Nor is it the occasion for accusation, except of yourself, and by implication those who find themselves in you.¹⁵

Cavell here underlines the intersection of the autobiographical and the philosophical operative in the genre of confession, and he traces that intersection to the workings of voice in the confessional text, a voice that is at once revelatory of inner experience and thoroughly impersonal. In *Philosophical Investigations*, "confession" for Cavell pivots on the local and actual movements and workings of the text's dominant voice and its many countervoices. Similarly, then, *Lyrical Ballads* is a vocally dynamic collection of texts, as Wordsworth orchestrates a poetics modeled on the structures of communicative contexts and situations—tellings, exhortations, responses, and conversations. As in Wittgenstein's, voices meet and run into each other in Wordsworth's texts. More than just stories or scenes of happening, many of Wordsworth's poems are investigations into the act of speaking or telling itself, something that importantly distinguishes the "lyrical" ballad from the traditional ballad grounded in the rehearsal of plot or event.¹⁶ In a "lyrical" ballad, we can recall, it is the feeling that "gives importance to the action and the situation" (*PW* 128); the action alone or in itself is frequently unimportant, so that many of the poems are actually shaped by this sense of inconsequence or deflation in the events they narrate. This is a characteristic of the collection about which Wordsworth grows explicitly self-conscious, for instance, in his prefatory note to "The Thorn" in which he underlines the importance of the role of the storyteller in understanding the psychological crux of the poem, or in "Simon Lee," when he entreats his reader to weave his own "tale" out of the apparently trivial "incident" that constitutes the climax in the text:

O Reader! had you in your mind
Such stores as silent thought can bring,
O gentle Reader! you would find
A tale in every thing.
What more I have to say is short,
And you must kindly take it:
It is no tale; but should you *think*,
Perhaps a tale you'll make it.
(ll. 65-72)¹⁷

The passage from the concluding stanzas of "Simon Lee" exemplifies how language in *Lyrical Ballads* is at all times categorically anchored to character. "It represents," writes Roger Sharrock, "an attempt to abolish any diction, any literary medium, in favor of the only words which can convey the object or experience as nakedly as possible, the words of the original participants in the action."¹⁸ Wordsworth's language thus seeks to be, as Hartman has written, "coterminous with life."¹⁹ One of Wordsworth's most sensitive readers, Don Bialostosky, terms this anchoring of poetic language in voice and character an aspect of what he terms Wordsworth's "poetics of speech" in *Lyrical Ballads*. He writes that

[Wordsworth's] poem is not an imitation of something nonverbal in the medium of words but a fictive thing whose existence is literally verbal, a made-up speech which presents the possible declarations, questions, appeals, affirmations, denials, emphases, and ellipses of "a man speaking."²⁰

As Bialostosky here underscores, Wordsworth's poems are thus free almost entirely of any imperative propelling them toward the transparent representation of stories or plots, just as Wittgenstein's reminders are often resistant to reporting on or exposing of ideas, and both are instead structured around literal utterance as the central animating event. Wittgenstein's polyvocal philosophical confession thus has something in common with Wordsworth's attempts to "follow the fluxes and refluxes of the mind" (*PW* 126). Both are methodologically invested in what Cavell has called the "phenomenological faithfulness of [the] reconstruction" of human experience—in other words, experiential fidelity to the shifts and movements of human thought and language as they come to unfold and take on meaning in the world. And both, furthermore, ground this phenomenological faithfulness in tracings and depictions of human voices.²¹ Like *Lyrical Ballads*, *Philosophical Investigations* thus actively resists what Richard Eldridge appositely has called the "underdescription" of human experience and expression, a phrase I take to describe a kind of resistance to a too-quick or too-general conception of the variability of human experiences.²²

It follows that both Wordsworth and Wittgenstein also resist uses of language unanchored to or ungrounded in the specificity, tangibility, and one might say wholeness or completeness of a total speech situation. Both in *Philosophical Investigations* and *Lyrical Ballads*, language is emphatically *placed*. In the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein is tireless in asking us to situate utterance or to imagine, project, or describe not just what is said but what is said when and by whom and why. His examples almost universally begin with a primitive setting of stage and scene (one meaning of the term "language-game" [§7]) and only then move on to eliciting responses from a hypothetical set of speakers: let's say I send someone shopping (§1), what if I point to two nuts (§28), pretend we're playing a game with colored squares (§48), imagine someone says "Moses did not exist" (§79). In *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth's emphasis similarly falls on the localization and contextualization of his figures and speakers: one expostulates, the other replies; father and son hold intermitted talk about place; a speaker relates an exchange with a little cottage girl about her siblings; an old sea captain tells the story of the devastated and miserable Martha Ray; a speaker turns memories over in his mind a few miles above Tintern Abbey during a tour, July 13, 1798. Not all poetry, as John Stuart Mill claimed, is overheard. It is, rather, the economy of a poetics grounded in a local and specific communicative situation that gives many of the *Lyrical Ballads* their "overheard" quality, or their sense of issuing with an auditory familiarity from which we are ultimately excluded and on which we as readers are asked to eavesdrop. One stands before Wordsworth's early verse as a *listener*, in contrast to Keats, for example, who always desires a *reader*—an untangler of written language that is unmoored to a human voice, and a reveler who luxuriates in slow and densely woven time. Wordsworth, like Wittgenstein, anchors his voices in the world.

The dominant question that has troubled readers of both Wordsworth and Wittgenstein on the topic of common language, its forms of expression, and its situatedness in the world consequently has been similar: Whose language shall count as the "real" or "everyday" one, and with what authority or under which criteria do I assert the commonality and commonness of this language? Put differently: Which

words are to act as representative of real or everyday language, what is supposed to be, as Wordsworth has it, the *very* (the “empirical,” let’s say) or what J. L. Austin might have called the *actual* language of men? In his reflections on Wordsworth’s Preface and “the language of ordinary life,” Coleridge in *Biographia Literaria* comes to anticipate these questions when he confronts the “defects” of Wordsworth’s theory in his retrospective reflections. Coleridge writes, “Every man’s language varies according to the extent of his knowledge, the activity of his faculties, and the depth or quickness of his feelings,” and there is thus no ground, he finds, for privileging one instance of a language over any other outside of what he calls the *lingua communis* (*BL* 2: 8, 55-56). Cavell gives voice to a variation of this problem in relation to Wittgenstein’s appeals to the first-person plural—to what “we” say, to “our” criteria, or “our” language—in *The Claim of Reason*:

It is, for [Wittgenstein], always *we* who “establish” the criteria under investigation. The criteria Wittgenstein appeals to—those which are, for him, the data of philosophy—are always “ours,” the “group” which forms his “authority” is always, apparently, the human group as such, the human being generally. When I voice them, I do so, or take myself to do so, as a member of that group, a representative human. [...] How can I, what gives me the right to, speak for the group of which I am a member? How have I gained that remarkable privilege? What confidence am I to place in a generalization from what I say to what everybody says? (*CR* 18).

Just as Wordsworth makes the audacious claim in the Preface that his poetry is written so as to “interest mankind permanently” (120) and reflects “the primary laws of our nature” (123), so Wittgenstein makes a claim to speak for what Cavell here calls human beings generally. Both are—from a certain point of view—preposterously arrogant claims, yet the specific kind of arrogance they bespeak for Cavell marks the arrogation of voice necessary to speak philosophically at all.²³ That is the mark of the philosophical voice—the claim to speak for a community, the claim to one’s exemplarity. To make a claim that *this* expression is just the right one given *this* situation or *this* object before me, however, is not to insist on one’s individual sense of things but to give oneself over to the ordinariness of the thing there and the ordinariness of the language used to speak about it. It becomes a claim about what one understands to be natural, inevitable, and only a matter of course; and it is as much a claim about language as it is a claim about the world. In a similar conceptual strain, M. H. Abrams in *The Mirror and the Lamp* asserts that Wordsworth’s conception of the real language of men is best understood as equivalent to a precisely “natural” language:

In his use, the term “real” as the norm of poetic language is for the most part interchangeable with the term “natural”—“the real language of *nature*” is one of his phrases—and “nature,” as elsewhere in Wordsworth connotes several attributes. First, the language of nature is not the language of poets as a class, but the language of mankind. It is not colored, as Wordsworth says, by a diction “peculiar to him as an individual Poet or belonging simply to Poets in general.” Second, it is exemplified in the language uttered by “the earliest poets,” who “wrote naturally, and as men”; and in prose, its best present instance is “the closest to nature.”²⁴

At stake for Wordsworth in his conception of “real language,” therefore, is the right to make a claim about what is—generally and regularly—instinctive, spontaneous, and thus “natural.” It is a claim about what is actually important, unimportant, moving, engaging, or uninteresting for me and thus for us in the world. In the same way, Wittgenstein declares in the *Investigations* that he is only providing remarks on what he analogously terms the “natural history of human beings” (§415).

III.

There is sometimes a sense in *Philosophical Investigations* that the voices tangled in dialogue speak past each other, or that one voice is seeking to educate the other, or at least seeking to make itself understood, and that this encounter between one teaching and the other learning is not free from serious difficulties or even impasses. Wittgenstein’s voices speak despite (or perhaps even because of) differences, gaps, and incongruities in their understanding. A recurring figure that appears throughout Cavell’s readings of *Philosophical Investigations* is one that makes sense of these moments in Wittgenstein’s text as what he calls “scenes of instruction.” Cavell’s understanding of these scenes or moments pivots on a connection between teaching or learning language and coming to be initiated into what Wittgenstein calls “forms of life” (§119), and in *The Claim of Reason* Cavell explains this connection by drawing a contrast between our “telling” beginners what a word means or our “teaching” them what things are and actually *initiating* them “into the relevant forms of life held in language and gathered around the objects and persons of our world” (CR 178). He writes similarly in a related formulation:

Wittgenstein’s thought is punctuated by ideas of normality and abnormality. It goes with a new depth in the idea that language is *learned*, that one *becomes* civilized. And in the recognition of how little can be *taught*; how, so to speak, helpless or impotent the teaching is, compared with the enormity of what is learned. (CR 111-12)

The feeling of helplessness or impotence Cavell here describes in the face of the “enormity” of what has to be taught and thus learned surfaces distinctly in one of Wordsworth’s original *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), “We Are Seven.” It is a poem that explicitly reflects on the sense captured when Wittgenstein’s speaker runs out of justifications or clarifications or explanations for his interlocutor, turns his spade over, and says, “This is simply what I do” (§217)—which I also take to mean, “This is what *we* do.” “We Are Seven” stages a moment in which, like Wittgenstein’s speaker whose spade hits bedrock, the educator realizes that explanations come to an end, exhaust themselves, and—in a moment in which it suddenly appears to be a matter of *his* education—that his efforts to induce the child to “go on” (§180) have to cease, and he has to give the child over to the thing to be learned itself. There is no knowledge—say, no one essential thing or one primary point—that the educator has to teach or communicate. It is the entirety of the thing to be learned—the ability to “go on” oneself—that makes the task of teaching in Wittgenstein’s example so daunting and at times wearying or even impossible.

“We Are Seven,” in this way, centers on a discrepancy between a young cottage girl and her adult interlocutor about what is to *count* in this world as a sibling, and thus a person, or a significant being. Their dialogue (both heartbreaking and humorous) begins thus:

"Sisters and brothers, little maid
 "How many may you be?"
 "How many? Seven in all," she said,
 And wondering looked at me.

 "And where are they, I pray you tell?"
 She answered, "Seven are we,
 "And two of us at Conway dwell,
 "And two are gone to sea.

 "Two of us in the church-yard lie,
 "My sister and my brother,
 "And in the church-yard cottage, I
 "Dwell near them with my mother."

 "You say that two at Conway dwell,
 "And two are gone to sea,
 "Yet you are seven; I pray you tell
 "Sweet Maid, how this may be?"

 Then did the little Maid reply,
 "Seven boys and girls are we;
 "Two of us in the church-yard lie,
 "Beneath the church-yard tree."

 "You run about, my little maid,
 "Your limbs they are alive;
 "If two are in the church-yard laid,
 "Then ye are only five."
 (13-35)

What is essential to note about the way the poem stages or poses the question of counting as a person is that it takes place entirely in the medium of a simplistic dialogue that turns wholly and playfully on the two speakers' usages of the verb *to be*. The young girl insists that, despite the death of two of her siblings, something of which she is fully cognizant and herself tells of, they still *are* seven in all, while her interlocutor asks, determinedly and repeatedly, how many they *be* and reasonably insists that they *are* only five. In the poem, the question of the young girl's having or living with or loving or disliking her brothers and sisters never arises, so that the exchange takes place entirely around the central question of who will *count at all* as a brother or sister—that is, who can at all "be." It is also important to note that these forms of relation (living with, loving, disliking) do not play a role in the girl's classifications of "being" because she in fact lives alone at home with her mother, since two of her siblings dwell at Conway and two are at sea. This question of being at all a person, or even counting as living despite being dead, will reappear later in *Lyrical Ballads* (1800) in one of Wordsworth's most haunting mediations on death, "A slumber did my spirit seal." There, the enigmatic "she" of the poem while living to the speaker "seem'd a thing" (l. 3)—that is, precisely not a living being rushing, like the rest, toward death, but something nearly inanimate; when alive, she "could not feel / The touch of earthly years" (ll. 3-4). It is only when she dies and explicitly has "no motion" or "force" (l. 5) and cannot hear or see that her body begins to circulate and she comes into to a sort of "life": she is "Roll'd round in earth's diurnal course / With rocks and stones and trees!" (ll. 7-8). Thus the question of "being" in the world—counting—comes to Wordsworth in "A slumber did my spirit seal" not

as an abstract question about the mind or the body but specifically as an internal interrogation of what it means to conceive of a person as a “thing”—she seemed a “thing”: first an immortal thing, then a thing in the ground—and in “We Are Seven,” the question surfaces as an exchange about what it might mean to use or to insist on a form of *to be*—“is” or “are”—to indicate a person’s existence or significance. “We Are Seven” is as much about this question of using language to indicate existence as it is about the abstract philosophical questions of counting as a significant being for someone else or of the dead having significance for the living. The poem is entirely efficacious in making its “are” (*we are seven*) surprising and new.

The fact that the cottage girl narrates the death of her two siblings to the speaker in the poem and tells him of visiting their graves, eating her supper there, and playing in their vicinity pushes forward the question of what exactly the two disagree about and what exactly the speaker knows or feels he knows that the young girl doesn’t. She understands that her brother and sister are no longer living; she understands that they lie in their graves, which she emphasizes “may be seen” (l. 36); but she contends that a tally of herself and her siblings yields seven and not the five that the requisite math (seven minus two) would dictate. She is not deluded; in fact, the poem may even suggest that perhaps the speaker himself is, since his account of their being only five pivots on his placing two of her siblings “in Heaven” (l. 62, 66), while the young girl has no misconceptions about their lying simply in the ground, a place where she, again, can eat and knit and play. The poem commences as the speaker asks about this “simple child” (l. 1), “What should it know of death?” (l. 4). But the young girl *does* know death, emphatically so, as she neither shuns nor hesitates around the topic in the poem and in fact volunteers a factual narrative: her sister Jane “in bed ... moaning lay” (l. 50), and her brother John “was forced to go” (l. 59) as well. Yet she insists that they are seven in all, and the adult with whom she is speaking is certain that, correspondingly, he has something to teach her. His exasperation and the topic of the rational education he attempts to give her surface in the final stanza: “But they are dead; those two are dead!” (l. 65), he shouts. She, however, is unwavering and resolute (she “would have her will” [l. 68]) and thus has the last word in the poem: “Nay, we are seven!” (l. 69), the girl exclaims one final time, bringing the exchange to a close.

What, then, one might ask, doesn’t the young girl *get*? What is it that her interlocutor wants her to understand that she apparently willfully refuses to register or accept? That death is death? How should one formulate the nature of the mathematical disagreement that the poem dramatizes? It would not be incorrect to say that the disagreement between the cottage girl and the adult speaker has to do at once with questions about ontology (what counts as a person), ethics (the significance of one being for another), morality (how we do or we should think about death), and language (when we can say or do say that a person *is*). To divorce any of these concerns or questions from each other in their crucial interweave in this text, I think, is to reduce the poem’s complexity, that is, the “enormity,” to recall Cavell, of what it is that this adult interlocutor actually might have to teach this particular child, that he would have to teach her—all at once—about language, ethics, morality, objects, and the significance of people in our world if he wanted to set her “are” straight. It hardly falls in line with the spirit of the poem to say that the adult objects to the girl’s naive and irrational forms of attachment to her deceased siblings; he doesn’t seek to deny the girl her childlike horizon of cares. There is no evidence at all in the poem that he disapproves of her affection for and fixation to the site of their graves, that is, to her behavior. He offers no signs of censure when she reports her eating and knitting and

playing at the gravesite and instead implicitly asks her to reflect yet again on the rational implications of her very own narrative and account:

“And when the ground was white with snow,
“And I could run and slide,
“My brother John was forced to go,
“And he lies by her side.”

“How many are you then,” said I,
“If they two are in Heaven?”
The little Maiden did reply,
“O Master! we are seven.”

(57-64)

Instead, then, one might say that what the speaker essentially objects to is the girl's insistent refrain (“we are seven”), in other words, how she answers him and comes to talk about the living and the dead in our world. He objects to her basic noncanonical redescription of a state of affairs, to the liberty she takes with the most ordinary of words, and what that license bespeaks about her understanding. She lives alone with her mother, and her dead siblings, lying just twelve steps from their door, are very much alive for her. Yet we don't say they *are* after they have died; she does. We might say just that, that they are still alive for us, or we might confess that when tallying we are still inclined to count them too. But to insist that they “are” is to break a foundational rule of the game—or to be a poet. What the young girl's insistent “are” registers, then, is her ability to make language stretch and reach to the limits of meaning, her ability to see something surprising and new in what we ordinarily say. Her “are” may be noncanonical, but it is feasible, possible, and falls within the horizons of comprehensibility for us. It would be simplistic to say that the cottage girl and her adult interlocutor simply disagree about usage. Rather, it is essential to understanding the spirit of the poem to say that the two actually don't share a world, and that we as readers are essentially drawn to the possibilities her world offers more than we are to his.

“We are talking about the spatial and temporal phenomenon of language,” writes Wittgenstein, “not about some non-spatial, non-temporal phantasm” (§108). Wordsworth, too, finds a deep link between the word and its localized unfolding, or the form of life, form of feeling, and form of moral relation that it is able to register and record. Words for both the poet and the philosopher are essentially saturated with the lives into which they are woven. They are revelatory of what we speakers, again, find interesting, significant, moving, important, unimportant, or utterly mundane. Insofar as they register these things, they offer a kind of record of what Wittgenstein called our natural history and Wordsworth the necessities of our nature, and insofar as philosophy too takes a consequential interest in that record, it is intimately bound to the poetic impulse. To reconstruct and reassemble that record in language in a way that renders it at once undamaged yet marvelous and surprising is one of Wordsworth's aspirations in *Lyrical Ballads*.

NOTES

¹ Friedrich Schlegel, *Ideas*, in *Classic and Romantic German Aesthetics*, ed. J. M. Bernstein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 261-268; 263. For an analysis of the relation between the literary and the philosophical in early German Romantic theory and practice, see especially Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy's monumental *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism* (trans. Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester [Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998]), which argues that the notion of literature in Jena Romanticism arises and develops according to a specifically philosophical crisis left to the Romantics in the wake of Kant's philosophy. The authors write provocatively, "Philosophy, then, controls romanticism." They continue: "In this context, and crudely translated, this means that Kant opens up the possibility of romanticism. [...] The romantics have no predecessors. Especially not in what the eighteenth century insistently held up under the name of *aesthetics*. On the contrary, it is because an entirely new and unforeseeable relation between aesthetics and philosophy will be articulated in Kant that a 'passage' to romanticism will become possible" (29). On the relationship between language, literature, linguistics, and the post-Kantian philosophical landscape in relation to Romanticism more generally, see also Angela Esterhammer's *The Romantic Performative: Language and Action in British and German Romanticism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), which makes the following suggestive claim: "What post-Kantian linguists embark on as an explicit theoretical project, their contemporaries undertake as part of the task of writing poetry in a transcendental-idealist frame of reference: all face the challenge of understanding and using language as a medium that suddenly appears vital to the construction of reality. Anyone reflecting on the relationship between language and reality at the end of the eighteenth century seems obligated to redefine *language* in light of the way the Kantian system redefined *reality*" (104).

² William Wordsworth, *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), 1: 124. All further references to the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* will refer to this edition and will be given parenthetically in the text (*PW*).

³ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 2: 156. All further references will refer to this edition and will be given parenthetically in the text (*BL*).

⁴ On the relation between Wordsworthian Romanticism and philosophy from differing and especially useful perspectives, see also Richard Eldridge, "Wordsworth and a New Condition of Philosophy," *Philosophy and Literature* 18 (1994): 50-71; and David Haney, "Poetry as Super-Genre in Wordsworth: Presentation and Ethics," *European Romantic Review* 5.1 (1994): 73-89.

⁵ Stanley Cavell notes this conceptual affinity, though only in passing, in his *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 6; Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte, 4th ed. (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2009), §116. Hereafter all references to *Philosophical Investigations* will be given parenthetically by section number.

⁶ Michael Fried, "Jeff Wall, Wittgenstein, and the Everyday," in *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 63-93.

⁷ Jan Tumlir, "The Hole Truth: Jam Tumlir Talks with Jeff Wall about *The Flooded Grave*," *Artforum*, vol. 39 (March 2001), 114; quoted in Fried, "Jeff Wall, Wittgenstein, and the Everyday," 64. There are analogues to this conception of the ordinary in the history of philosophy, ones that likewise draw on the idea that what is familiar actually can be or become very strange, that what is nearest is furthest. One might think of Freud's conception of the uncanny or even the very idea of the unconscious; or one might think of certain trains in Heidegger's thinking (an affinity Fried himself highlights at length in his work on Wall). My point in this paper, however, will be less to interrogate the strictly philosophical contours of the notion of the everyday than, instead, to show how the idea of the ordinary or everyday and its strong connection to a certain philosophical project or tradition might be used to illuminate the stakes of a particular work of art.

⁸ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value: A Selection from the Posthumous Remains*, ed. Georg Henrik von Wright with Heikki Nyman; rev. ed. Alois Pichler, trans. Peter Winch (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1998), 6e-7e; quoted in Fried, "Jeff Wall, Wittgenstein, and the Everyday," 76.

⁹ Andrew Bennett, "Wordsworth's Poetic Ignorance," in *Wordsworth's Poetic Theory: Knowledge, Language, Experience*, ed. Alexander Regier and Stefan H. Uhlig (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 19-35.

¹⁰ See Stanley Cavell, "The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy," in *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 44-72. Because he writes on the peripheries of both sides of the traditional philosophical divide, Cavell through his work writes within the very problem of "availability"—that is, the fact that writing is always inextricably a writing for, or a being available to. When he writes of the "availability" of Wittgenstein's later philosophy in this early essay, Cavell's use of the term "availability" underscores the tonally sensitive ear with which he writes or must write to the reception, uptake, and registers of his words and the horizons of interest that they record and explore. Cavell's work in writing and thought thus consist of a certain labor of making himself understood—making his own thinking and voice turn available—and the very core of his philosophical insights lies precisely in the knowledge that to be understood is ultimately to be heard in language, and to be heard specifically in such a way that the repetition of one's own thoughts from one's interlocutor comes back to oneself as something recognizable as those thoughts and not something entirely misshapen.

- ¹¹. Matthew Arnold, *Selected Poems of William Wordsworth*, ed. Harrison Ross Steeves (New York: Harcourt, 1922), 18-19.
- ¹². Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, 2: 80; M. H. Abrams, "Introduction: Two Roads to Wordsworth," in *Wordsworth: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. M. H. Abrams (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1972), 3; Paul de Man, "Wordsworth and the Victorians," in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 87; Geoffrey Hartman, "The Unremarkable Poet," in *The Unremarkable Wordsworth* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 212; David Perkins, *The Poetry of Sincerity* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1964), 44.
- ¹³. John Danby, *The Simple Wordsworth: Studies in the Poems, 1797-1807* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960), 18.
- ¹⁴. William Hazlitt, "Mr. Wordsworth," in *Selected Writings*, ed. Jon Cook (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 347-358.
- ¹⁵. Cavell, "The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy," 71.
- ¹⁶. On this point about the role of narrative or plot in *Lyrical Ballads*, see especially Stephen Parrish, "Dramatic Technique in the *Lyrical Ballads*," *PMLA* 74.1 (1959) 85-97, who argues that the theory of poetry Wordsworth lays out in the Preface actually disavows the purpose of a traditional ballad, namely, telling a story for its own sake (86); as well as Mary Jacobus, *Tradition and Experiment in Wordsworth's Lyrical Ballads* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), who argues that Wordsworth's achievement in the ballad genre lies in "portraying precisely those states and feelings least susceptible to narrative presentation" (233).
- ¹⁷. All citations of the texts of *Lyrical Ballads* are taken from the 1798 edition of the collection in William Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads and Other Poems, 1797-1800*, ed. James Butler and Karen Green (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1992).
- ¹⁸. Roger Sharrock, "Wordsworth's Revolt against Literature," *Essays in Criticism* 3.5 (1953), 396-412; 401.
- ¹⁹. Geoffrey Hartman, "Inscriptions and Romantic Nature Poetry," in *The Unremarkable Wordsworth*, 44.
- ²⁰. Don Bialostosky, *Making Tales: The Poetics of Wordsworth's Narrative Experiments* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 17.
- ²¹. Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 142. All further references will refer to this edition and will be given parenthetically in the text (*CR*).
- ²². Richard Eldridge, *Leading a Human Life: Wittgenstein, Intentionality, and Romanticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 8.
- ²³. Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy: Autobiographical Exercises* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994).
- ²⁴. M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (London: Oxford University Press, 1953), 110-11.

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