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The River Duddon and William Wordsworth's
Evolving Poetics of Collection

Shannon M. Stimpson

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

The River Duddon and William Wordsworth's Evolving Poetics of Collection

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Despite its impact in generating a more positive reception toward Wordsworth's work among his contemporaries, *The River Duddon* volume has received comparatively little critical attention in recent scholarship. On some level, this is unsurprising given the relative unpopularity of Wordsworth's later work among modern readers, but I believe that the relative shortage of critical scholarship on *The River Duddon* is due, at least in part, to a symptomatic failure to read the volume in its entirety.

This essay takes up the challenge of following Wordsworth's directive to read *The River Duddon* volume as a unified whole. While I cannot account for every inclusion, I set out to explore how the idea of collection functions as the unifying force governing the volume's organizational and thematic structure. I argue that although the individual pieces that make up the collection are distinct from each other in their style, subject matter, and date of composition, together they constitute an exploration of the beauty of Wordsworth's native region and his interest in harmonizing aesthetic principles of variety and unity. When read as parts of a dialogical exchange rather than as self-contained units, the individual texts in *The River Duddon* collectively present an array of perspectives through which Wordsworth not only celebrates the rich diversity of the Lake District's local customs and landscapes, but also theorize a sophisticated poetics of collection which he hoped would help justify his poetic program and reinforce the literary and cultural weight of his future work.

Keywords: William Wordsworth, collection, *The River Duddon*, unity, tourism, Romantic volumes, middle years, *The Excursion*, *Poems* (1815), *Topographical Description*, travel, sonnet, aesthetics

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Introduction

On an otherwise nondescript December day in 1818, Mary Wordsworth records in a letter to her sister, Sara Hutchinson,

William is sitting with his feet on the fender and his verses in hand—nay they have dropped upon his knee and he is asleep from sheer exhaustion—he has worked so long—he has written 21 sonnets (including 2 old ones) on the river Duddon—they all together compose one poem. (41)

Wordsworth's exertion would shortly result in the publication of *The River Duddon, A Series of Sonnets: Vaudracour and Julia: and Other Poems. To Which is Annexed, A Topographical Description of the Country of the Lakes, in the North of England*. It is a collection of poetry and prose described in the volume's advertisement as "the third and last volume of the Author's Miscellaneous poems." At first glance, it does seem rather miscellaneous. Beginning with a sequence of thirty-three sonnets on the Duddon, the volume also includes examples of historical romance, memoir, lyric poems, odes, ballads, inscriptions, editorial commentary, and a lengthy essay describing topographical views for tourists traveling to the Lake District. The individual inclusions are distinct from each other in their style, subject matter, and date of composition. Nonetheless, I argue that they comprise a cohesive literary collection, or what M. L. Rosenthal and Sally Gall (in their work on the modern poetic sequence) term a specific "grouping of . . . poems and passages [in a single volume or book], rarely uniform in pattern, which tend to interact as an organic whole" (9). When read as parts of "one poem," to recall Mary Wordsworth's phrase, or as interjections in a dialogical exchange rather than self-contained units, the individual parts in *The River Duddon* collectively disclose Wordsworth's anxiety to justify and reinforce the literary and cultural weight of his creative work to a

readership that he felt was lacking in aesthetic judgment and taste. The volume as a whole is grounded in Wordsworth's exploration of the Lake District and his efforts to negotiate and harmonize his aesthetic ideals into a single, comprehensive poetic vision.

By 1820, Wordsworth has adopted the once pejorative "Lake Poet" label as a badge of honor and a program statement for his creative work. The poet and the landscape he celebrates have become inextricable. As readers imaginatively accompany Wordsworth on his descriptive tour of the Lake District throughout the *Duddon* volume, he implicitly instructs them on how to read and reread his collections by mapping out lines of textual connectivity and redirecting readers back to recurring and centralizing ideas. He adds to his poems long sections of topographical prose, presenting the Lake District as a site for lessons in reading not only the landscape, but also Wordsworth's literary collections. He anticipates that by guiding readers to exercise a more exacting eye toward the details of the landscape, they will translate that experience into an equally careful and engaged reading of his poetry. The collection as a whole, especially through the addition of "Topographical Description," is uniquely designed to situate the Lake District within a larger literary tradition and to locate Wordsworth's particular brand of poetics at the center of that tradition.

Unfortunately, awareness of the intertextual relationships in *The River Duddon* and the aesthetic principles governing the volume's organization and arrangement are generally lost upon modern readers, who, if they have read the *Duddon* sonnets at all, are most likely to have read them outside the volume's original context. The relative paucity of current scholarship on the *Duddon* volume as a collection attests to what I consider to be a critical failure to read the volume in its entirety and a symptomatic propensity to read the individual poems and prose inclusions as independent and unrelated texts. While there are certainly valid readings of discrete

sections of the Duddon volume, I submit that ignoring the composite identity of *The River Duddon* is, at least in some degree, to misread it. Isolating its parts removes an important contextual frame of reference and obscures the volume's aesthetic orientation.

One probable reason *The River Duddon* has been neglected is that the lifespan of the original 1820 volume was very short. *The River Duddon* went to press in April of 1820; in late July of the same year, Wordsworth republished the then popular Duddon sonnets separately in his fourth volume of *The Miscellaneous Poems*. Other poems included in the Duddon volume were likewise dispersed into edited collections, and "Topographical Description" was revised, retitled, and published independently as a guidebook in 1822. *The River Duddon*, in its original configuration, was never republished; its importance in reestablishing Wordsworth's reputation and its value as a creative work faded with the advent of newer editions of his collected works. Considering its unique publication history, it is not surprising that comparatively little scholarship has attempted to work out the contextual relationships between the individual texts that comprise the Duddon volume. However, I maintain that enlarging the scope of our interpretive framework by considering how *The River Duddon* functions as a collection yields a more nuanced and complete understanding of Wordsworth's self-constructed poetic identity and his poetics as of 1819-20.

Wordsworth and Collection

Reasons for attempting a more comprehensive reading of *The River Duddon* are numerous, but one compelling rationale is Wordsworth's extensive work and commentary on arranging and compiling edited poetic collections throughout his career. Arguably more than any other Romantic writer, Wordsworth exerted assiduous, even compulsive attention to the particular manner in which his edited collections were organized and presented to the public. In

his book on Romantic collections *The Poem and the Book*, Neil Fraistat claims that none of the Romantic writers had “a greater penchant than Wordsworth for what might be called ‘contextual architecture,’” or the organization and arrangement of individual texts into a conversational literary collection (5-6).¹ Sally Bushnell’s thorough analysis of Wordsworth’s composition process in her monograph *Text as Process*, documents the degree to which organizing, revising, and compiling past work was a part of Wordsworth’s creative productivity. Wordsworth’s approach, she argues, was primarily informed by a “reemployment of material that is written for one context, in another” (85-86). In their independent studies of Wordsworth’s poetics, Andrew Bennett and Stephen Gill both suggest that this obsession with repurposing older material for inclusion in new collections was directly connected to Wordsworth’s poetics of writing and his ongoing efforts to demonstrate how *all* of his creative work corresponded to that program (Bennett 4; Gill, *Wordsworth’s Revisitings* 10). Based on his correspondences and his editorial commentary in published works, it is clear that Wordsworth was thinking through the ideas of collection and compilation as ways of connecting his literary corpus into a unified project early in his career and that after 1814 he was especially invested in the work of theorizing collective composition and arrangement.

¹ Fraistat’s claim refers to a well-known quote in the 1814 Preface to the *Excursion* in which Wordsworth compares his oeuvre to a Gothic church: “The two Works have the same kind of relation to each other...as the Anti-chapel [sic] has to the body of a gothic Church. Continuing this allusion, he may be permitted to add, that his minor Pieces...when they shall be properly arranged, will be found by the attentive Reader to have such connection with the main Work as may give them claim to be likened to the little Cells, Oratories, and sepulchral Recesses, ordinarily included in those Edifices” (Preface ix).

Experimenting with the order, language, and tenor of his creative productions increasingly occupied Wordsworth's time during the middle and later years of his life. As Alan Liu puts it in *Wordsworth: A Sense of History*, Wordsworth's increased attention to collected editions and their aesthetic potential was ultimately driven by an impulse to articulate an all-encompassing system that assimilated his individual work into a "single comprehensiveness" (493). The fact that collections formed such a pivotal role in Wordsworth poetic career and that he sustains such a strong interest in them, suggests that analyzing them in their entirety should be the rule rather than the exception.

The Emergence of *The River Duddon*

Another important reason to study the Duddon volume as a cohesive collection is to deepen our understanding of Wordsworth's poetic ambitions. Reviewing biographical facts and the reception history of Wordsworth's work leading up to the publication of *The River Duddon* help us to recognize how this particular literary collection played a role in reinforcing Wordsworth's ties to the Lake District. Moreover, by putting *The River Duddon* in context with Wordsworth's analogous publications, we get a clearer idea of why literary collections as a genre held such promise for Wordsworth.

For months preceding the publication of *The River Duddon*, Wordsworth faced enormous pressure from close friends and family to produce a book of poetry that would generate more money and better reviews. High-minded as his ideals may have been, Wordsworth's artistic endeavors were necessarily informed by practical considerations. By 1819, Wordsworth's sales were down and his poetic reputation was strongly challenged by several important critics who held the Lake School poets and their poetic theories in contempt. The devastating critical reviews of his 1807 publication of *Poems, in Two Volumes* not only impacted Wordsworth's efforts to

establish a professional identity independent from Samuel Taylor Coleridge and their Alfoxden projects (Gill, *Wordsworth: A Life* 259), but it also seems to have deeply injured Wordsworth's faith in his readers. His well-known letter to Lady Beaumont in May of 1807 hardly masks his bitterness toward unfeeling "London wits and witlings" whose "bad passions" led them to misunderstand his creative genius. But his real sense of disappointment resided with "grave, kindly-natured, worthy persons" who possessed both taste and feeling, but had been "misled" by reviewers and had therefore failed to engage in the experience Wordsworth believed his poetry offered. "I hope," he wrote, "that these Volumes are not without some recommendations, even for Readers of this class, but their imagination has slept; and the voice which is the voice of my Poetry without Imagination cannot be heard" (146). He ended his letter by concluding that if his readers would not understand his aesthetics, he would take up the task of helping them to do so. The poet, Wordsworth averred, must "create the taste by which he is to be relished; he must teach the art by which he is to be seen . . . for this multitude of unhappy, and misguided, and misguiding beings, an entire regeneration must be produced; and if this be possible, it must be a work of *time*" (150).

Accordingly, although Wordsworth was productive for the next several years, composing or reworking such important poems as *The White Doe of Rylstone*, *The Ruined Cottage*, *The Pedlar*, *Home at Grasmere*, and *The Prelude*, as well as the prose treatise *The Convention of Cintra* and his introduction to *Select Views in Cumberland, Westmoreland, and Lancashire*, he withdrew himself and his work from public scrutiny, "retir[ing] to his native mountains with the hope of being able to construct a literary Work that might live" (Preface, *The Excursion* viii). John Mahoney attributes this "fallow" period to a "malaise" and "depression" that followed a wave of slashing reviews in 1807 and 1808 (13). Yet, it seems more likely that Wordsworth's

decision to distance himself from London was part of deliberate plan to reconstruct his reputation. Occupying the space he poeticized was an important step in associating his literary identity specifically with the Lake District and reclaiming it as an aesthetic landscape.

Wordsworth promised that his removal to the Lakes would result in the composition of his most impressive work, a work that would illustrate the poetic vision that unified all of his poetic productions. It was a work that Wordsworth declared must “live,” despite the harsh criticism of his detractors. It was a work that Wordsworth hoped would define him both geographically and canonically in literary history.

In 1814 Wordsworth reentered the public arena with the publication of *The Excursion*. It was also the first time that Wordsworth publicly named the project that, as he still hoped, was to become his magnum opus: *The Recluse*. In the Preface to *The Excursion*, Wordsworth declares that it is not his intention to “announce a system” that fully explains the organizational and thematic composition of his life’s work, but that readers might extrapolate this system by carefully reading the “preparatory” works leading up to its publication (x). While *The Excursion* itself not a literary collection, Wordsworth saw it as part of a group of creative productions that would jointly map out the theoretical and aesthetic principles that informed his poetics. Wordsworth comments that the purpose of these works is to “convey[] to the mind clear thoughts, lively images, and strong feelings” so that “the Reader will have no difficulty extracting the system for himself” (x). Over the next several years Wordsworth’s succeeding publications augmented and clarified this purpose, theorizing the system *The Recluse* would purportedly exemplify upon its completion. *The River Duddon* was one of several productions designed to help readers to intuit and value his poetics. Given that Wordsworth felt that critics and readers had misunderstood and misinterpreted his earlier work, the edited collections

between 1814 and 1820 were also largely designed to prevent future misreading. David Duff's analysis of the 1815 *Poems* applies equally well to *The River Duddon*: "the whole thrust of the Preface is to tell his readers how to read, and *not* to read, the poems: what to look for, where to find it, how to judge" (86).

Of the two major published collections during this period, *Poems* (1815) might be Wordsworth's most self-conscious exposition on classification and form (it is certainly one of the most studied texts on the subject), but *The River Duddon* is the more eclectic and experimental, pushing the boundaries of literary collection as a genre and testing the limits of form and arrangement in a manner that is also highly theoretical. Read in the context of Wordsworth's anxiety to defend his poetics and prepare the way for *The Recluse*, *The River Duddon* functions as part of an elaborate effort to shape his readers' interpretive responses. Famously, the result of this effort was not the completion of *The Recluse*. Nonetheless, through these publications Wordsworth cultivated a more sympathetic audience, and he developed a sophisticated poetics of collection through which he tied his poetical program ever more closely to the Lake District.²

² The Advertisement to *The River Duddon* declares that this is to be Wordsworth's "last" volume of "Miscellaneous Poems." Given its contextual history, it is logical to assume that Wordsworth is declaring his intention to put aside his more "minor" endeavors until the completion of *The Recluse*. But, as the culmination of *The Recluse* receded further and further from realization, what may have started off as a kind of clearinghouse project seems to have evolved into something entirely different and more formative than Wordsworth anticipated.

Collection and *The River Duddon*

In the last two sections I have attempted to contextualize *The River Duddon* as part of Wordsworth's larger programmatic ambitions. In this section I would like to begin by considering the organizational structure and arrangement of *The River Duddon* in particular. Because the specific inclusions in *The River Duddon* are not generally well-known, it may be helpful to begin by first reviewing its contents page (see Fig. 1). The contents might call attention to Wordsworth's versatility and skill as a writer, but nothing immediately suggests any specific logic to the ordering and arrangement of the collection, beyond Wordsworth's apparent eagerness to display his command over poetic forms.³ The title page (see Fig. 2), however, does suggest a general organizational structure, dividing the collection into four parts: the River Duddon sonnets, "Vaudracour and Julia," Other Poems (a catchall category for miscellaneous verses), and "Topographical Description." While the title page may not be wholly representative of Wordsworth's organizational intentions, it still forms an important impression about how the volume can be interpreted and read.

One significant textual clue suggests that the arrangement of *The River Duddon* was carefully thought out. In his prefatory note to "Topographical Description," Wordsworth states that the essay was included "from a consciousness of its having been written in the same spirit which dictated several of the poems, and from a belief that it will tend materially to illustrate them" (214). As I will demonstrate in my analysis below, readers who take seriously Wordsworth's insistence that "Topographical Description" is integrally connected to the rest of

³ Neil Fraistat observes that miscellaneous collections were traditionally designed as evidence of a poet's education and mastery over a variety of literary styles. They were often used by poets working to establish their place in the literary tradition. See *The Poem and the Book* 26-27.

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Figure 1: Contents Page of *The River Duddon*

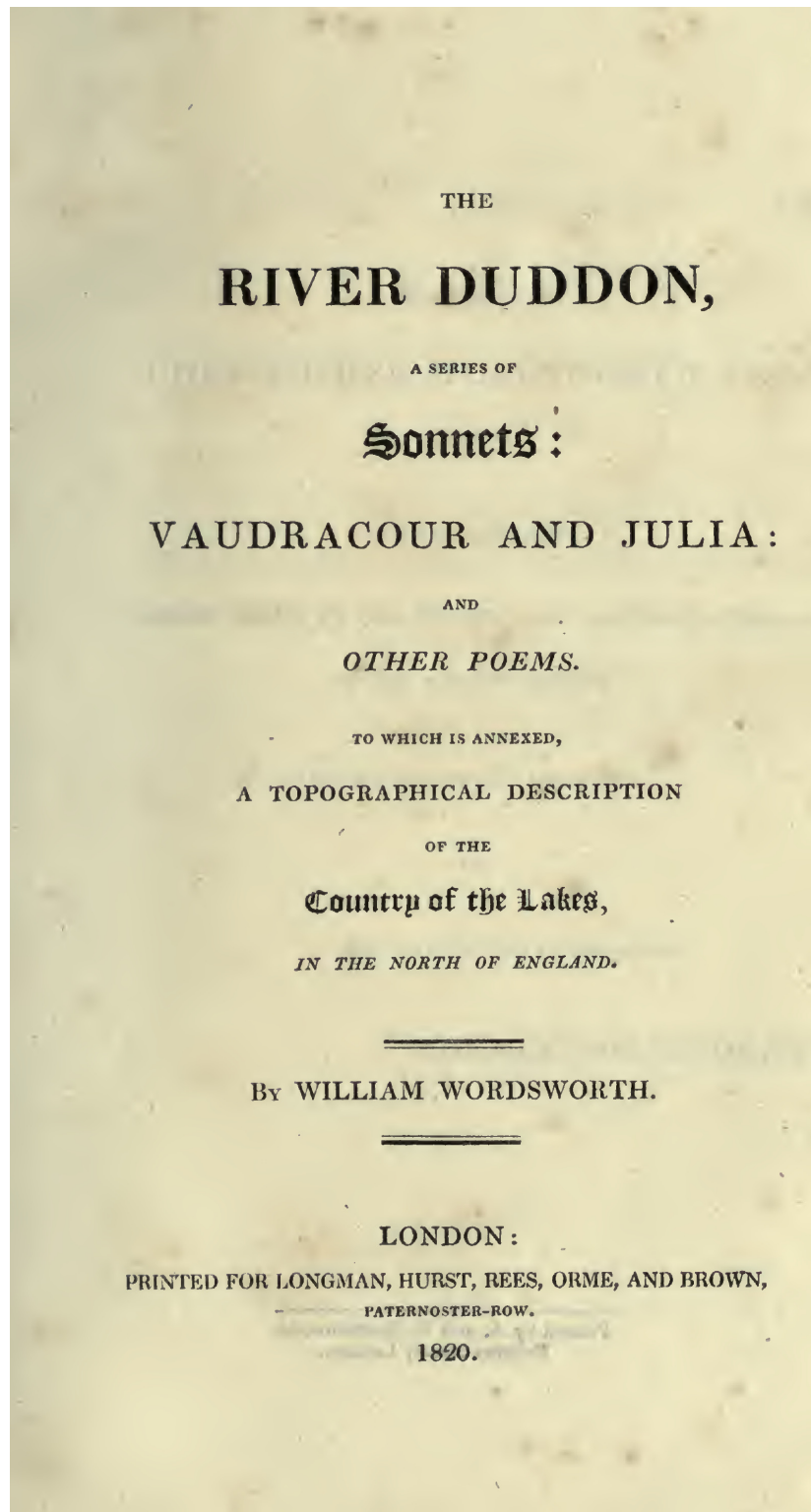


Figure 2: Title Page of *The River Duddon*

the volume do find that the poems are better understood from close familiarity with it.

Typographical similarities on the title page reinforce Wordsworth's statement that the Duddon sonnets and "Topographical Description" are distinctly associated and should be read in context with each other. Although the size of the typeface places greater emphasis on the Duddon sonnets, the two titles appear in identical decorative fonts, creating a kind of visual mirror that cues the reader to the highly reflective quality of the collection. The design also indirectly indicates that Wordsworth expects that his readers will draw key insights from adopting a more holistic interpretive approach, synthesizing how different parts speak to each other and how they reflect upon the volume as a whole.

In a letter written to Henry Crabb Robinson in April of 1826, Wordsworth explains that his approach to the arrangement of miscellaneous volumes is not only purposeful, but that it is grounded in aesthetic principle. He writes,

Miscellaneous poems ought not to be jumbled together at *random*. Were this done with mine the passage from one to another would often be insupportably offensive; but in my judgment the only thing of much importance in arrangement is that one poem should shade off happily into another, and the contrasts where they occur be clear of all harshness or abruptness...If this be not attended to, classification by subject, or by form is of no value; for nothing can compensate for the neglect of it. (440)

Wordsworth's use of the words "shade" and "subtle contrast" would have been immediately recognized by Robinson as clear references to the eighteenth-century aesthetic of the beautiful which valued principles of harmony, variety, and balanced composition in works of art and in the natural world. It is not coincidental that these artistic principles are repeatedly iterated throughout *The River Duddon*, or that the beautiful is one of two major aesthetic models that

Wordsworth discusses at length in “Topographical Description.” For example, Wordsworth argues that the tourist who makes a “careful” study of “what already exists” in the natural world will perceive “the fine gradations by which in nature one thing passes away into another, and the boundaries that constitute individuality, disappear in one instance, only to be revived elsewhere under a more alluring form” (278-79). Wordsworth goes to great lengths here and throughout “Topographical Description” to present the aesthetic of the beautiful as a formative physical power that actively shapes the visible world in nature. He writes, “Sublimity is the result of Nature’s first great dealings with the superficies of the earth; but the general tendency of her subsequent operations, is towards the production of beauty, by a multiplicity of symmetrical parts uniting in a consistent whole” (236). In naturalizing the aesthetic of the beautiful, conflating aesthetic processes with the physical phenomena that carve the topographical face of the landscape, Wordsworth effectively transforms nature into a work of art to be viewed, consumed, and appreciated. Concurrently, Wordsworth breathes life into his own poetic productions which rely upon the same “living principles” as nature for their design. Just as the “boundaries that constitute individuality” are subsumed into a “more alluring form” in nature, Wordsworth’s letter to Robinson suggests that the individual poems are likewise subordinate to the collection of which they are a part.

The subordination of the poem (or landscape feature) to the collection (or region) is dramatically illustrated in Sonnet XXXI, where the swirling motion of the Duddon is finally absorbed into the Irish Sea. Wordsworth describes the merger between these bodies of water as the place where “mightiest rivers” will “sink, and forget their nature,” (5-6) expanding into an entirely different form. The river takes its meaning from its place in the whole hydrological system. Up to this point the Duddon, which Wordsworth has already been established as a

symbol for poetic inspiration and production in earlier sonnets, has delighted and inspired the imagination, but has provided no sense of poetic closure. The sublimation of the river to the sea, with its powerful, spiritual imagery in Sonnet XXXII, culminates the poet's organic vision for both poet and reader. While the endless variations of the river fascinate, it is the image of wholeness embodied in the large, universal expanse of "the Deep" water that ultimately conveys "peace of heart" and "calm of mind and soul" (13) which "prepare" the poet to "mingle with Eternity!" (14). The sonnets work together as a whole to lead the reader to this point of emotional and imaginative resolution and wholeness.

For Wordsworth, creating continuity (or points in which different texts speak to each other towards a unified purpose) in *The River Duddon* seems to have less to do with formal constraints via an external system of classification or organization (i.e., date of composition, genre, etc.) and more to do with internal moments of tonal, textual, and even typographical resonance—or, in other words, the *feel* of the collection.⁴ In effect, Wordsworth asks his readers to draw interpretive conclusions about these points of textual resonance through what Barbara Herrnstein Smith calls "retrospective patterning," or the process by which a reader "perceives that seemingly gratuitous or random events, details, and juxtapositions have been selected in accord with certain principles" (119). In "To the Same" Wordsworth suggests that intuiting

⁴ Wordsworth does not include an explanatory preface outlining his organizational choices in *The River Duddon*. This is somewhat of a departure from his other edited collections from the same period. While Wordsworth was always keenly aware of how any of his published works fit into his larger poetic oeuvre, *The River Duddon* is not overtly governed by the system of classification that Wordsworth ultimately adopted as the frame for most of his edited collections.

subtle points of similarity or contrast is an aesthetic skill that relies upon, at least to some degree, a reader's emotional response to a work of art.

Oh, 'tis the *heart* that magnifies this life.
 Making a truth and beauty of her own.
 And moss-grown alleys, circumscribing shades,
 And gurgling rills assist her in the work. (11-14)

These lines, a fresh enunciation of the egotistical sublime, argue that attunement to subtle situational beauties will refine the reader's sensibility as well as the poet's. The reader of this text-typography, like the poet, must make and magnify its available "life." Good aesthetic judgment requires not only an intellectual response, but also an emotive one. Thus, perceiving foundational principles that inform a work of art requires both a feeling heart and discerning mind, or, as Wordsworth writes in "Topographical Description," "an eye to perceive and a heart to enjoy" (308).

A curious example of the feeling mind at work is found in Wordsworth's singular account of the Reverend Robert Walker—a feature praised by many of the volume's original reviewers. As part of his editorial notes to Sonnet XVIII, Wordsworth includes a tributary memoir recounting the life of the curate of Seathwaite. Presented as an epitome of pastoral Christian piety and virtue, Walker is generous, industrious, humble, and esteemed by all in the community. The reverend's paternal care over his family and neighbors embodies the rustic spirit of the "perfect Republic of Shepherds and Agriculturalists," described in "Topographical Description," where "The Chapel was the only edifice that presided over these dwellings, the supreme head of this pure Commonwealth" (271). In this idealized society, all things are shared in common and the members of the community work as a unified body to preserve and transmit

cherished rural values and local traditions for future generations. Walker's life functions as symbol of the peculiar "old customs and usages" (57) that played central role in Wordsworth's interpretative vision of the Lake District. The history of an obscure curate, Stephen Gill remarks, is transformed into a "living memory of the valley" that imbues the entire region with a feeling of virtue and sanctity ("Wordsworth" 33). The spirit of Walker's memory conjures a powerful connection to the aspects of rural life that Wordsworth admires, simplicity of character and an abiding connection to and appreciation of nature. By Wordsworth's account, Walker was a man of fine taste and great feeling. His mind was both "fervent and eloquent," and his affections were "tenderly alive to all the duties of his pastoral office" despite his obligation to fulfill physically taxing duties that threatened to strain these "more precious parts of his nature" (61).

The quiet life of this simple country curate directly contrasts with the public life led by Christopher Wordsworth, the only other cleric featured in the Duddon volume. In his sonnet addressed to his brother, Wordsworth decries the "imperial City's din" that continually "agitates" and "overwhelm[s]" the senses, while he reverences the "ancient Manners" and "wholesome laws" that have produced and protected personages like Walker (73-76, 60-61). Unfortunately, Wordsworth knows that these "sure defenses" (60) of his beloved region are quickly losing hold and that figures like Walker are rapidly being replaced by people whose sensibilities have been dulled from life in the city. Still, as he asserts in the final quartet of the sonnet, Wordsworth hopes that he can "win" the attention of his brother by evoking images that "neither overwhelm nor cloy, / But fill the hollow vale with joy!" (75, 77-8).

Shaping the aesthetic taste of tourists and residents in the Lake District is Wordsworth's stated purpose for writing "Topographical Description." He observes, "It is hoped, also that this Essay may become generally serviceable by leading to habits of more exact and considerate

observation than, as far as the writer knows, have hitherto been applied to local scenery” (216). Troubled by changes in the landscape due to new-fangled planting practices and architectural designs introduced by non-native inhabitants, Wordsworth levels pointed criticism toward the “nouveau riche class including ‘well-to-do merchants, lawyers, and industrialists’...who had begun to build fashionable residences and second homes in the area between 1770 and 1830” (Hess 91). In other words, he focuses his attention on those whose circumstances, either through prosperity or passion, have put them in a position to affect lasting change in the region. Wordsworth worries that this influential class, who should be well-educated in matters of aesthetic judgment, have injured their understanding and are more motivated by fashionable whims than by genuine taste. Because Wordsworth fundamentally treats nature as art, he assumes that social depreciation of nature is closely tied to social devaluation of poetic or artistic production. Therefore, the success of his poetic program depends, at least in part, on helping his readers to appreciate nature (and by extension his poetics) by raising them to a higher level of aesthetic discernment.

Using retrospective patterning to detect how Wordsworth’s anxiety regarding the rising middle class resonates throughout the Duddon volume yields an interesting insight into the seemingly unrelated inclusion of “Vaudracour and Julia.” Usually interpreted as a thinly-veiled recasting of his affair with Annette Vallon during his youth, “Vaudracour and Julia” is a tragic story about unrequited love and disappointed expectations in the midst of political turmoil. Falling directly after Wordsworth’s account of Reverend Walker, the unhappy state of familial and political affairs in the poem sharply contrasts with the serene tonal quality of the memoir. The contrast underscores Wordsworth’s criticism of “high-born” individuals who have abused their social power and perverted their understanding. Unlike Reverend Walker, who “reconciled”

the “adverse” circumstances of his birth and status and maintained strong, moral sensibilities (61), the nobility in “Vaudracour and Julia” use their privileged position to enact selfish and misguided judgment to devastating effect. In his article “Wordsworth’s ‘Vaudracour and Julia’ and ‘Lament of Mary Queen of Scots,’” Jalal Uddin Khan writes,

By having a poem deeply critical of the pre-Revolutional French nobility and juxtaposed to a celebration of the English Lake District and English establishments, Wordsworth distances himself from direct criticism of the English aristocracy while indirectly attacking those members of it who fail to live up to the values of magnanimity and greatness of heart expected of them. (315)

“Vaudracour and Julia” highlights the frustration Wordsworth expresses with his upper-class readers in “Topographical Description” who have failed to live up to the values of aesthetic judgment and feeling Wordsworth expects from them and indirectly urges readers to correct their misguided practices by relying upon the guidance of Wordsworth’s superior taste.

In *The River Duddon*, Wordsworth asks readers to “surrender up [their] minds with a “disposition ready to be pleased” (“Topographical Description” 318), and by so doing, to embrace Wordsworth’s aesthetic views as their own. Wordsworth addresses readers as if he wishes only to “assist” in the improvement of general taste, but it becomes clear as the reader progresses through the volume that he wants the reader to literally unite “with me [Wordsworth] in imagination” (217); in other words, Wordsworth directs readers to see what he sees and to feel what he feels. As Jacqueline Labbe observes,

the tourist who reads and follows Wordsworth’s suggestions will follow the routes most dear and familiar to Wordsworth himself; that tourist will see through Wordsworth’s eyes

. . . In fact, he will *be* Wordsworth, because Wordsworth has imputed to his reader / potential traveler his own reactions and made them universal. (*Romantic Visualities* 135)

By universalizing his aesthetic views, Wordsworth creates the impression that he is teaching general principles of good taste, when he is really bespeaking his own interpretative process. By drawing the reader's attention to specific vantage points, suggesting an ideal order for those points, and then framing the scope by which the reader draws interpretive conclusions, Wordsworth carefully controls the thought climate and aesthetic experience. In her book *On Longing*, Susan Stewart suggests that the potential for this kind of artistic manipulation is most fully realized in collections. She explains, "The collection is a form of art as play, a form involving the reframing of objects within a world of attention and manipulation of context" (151). In a collection, each item takes its significance from the logic of the whole, as the collector contextualizes appropriated objects or ideas into a specific order with a specific purpose in mind (151). The arrangement of *The River Duddon* exemplifies this principle. Wordsworth "collects" the features of the Lake District, both typographical and cultural, in order to place himself at its creative origin as the region's central authority.

The Duddon volume begins with Wordsworth's intention to trace the River Duddon's course through poetic renderings. In his opening sonnet, Wordsworth invokes the river to provide him with ample poetic inspiration: "Pure flow the verse, pure, vigorous, free, and bright, / For Duddon, long love'd Duddon, is my theme!" (13-14). Curiously Wordsworth sets off, not at the river's origin, but rather in search of it. In Sonnet I he declares, "I seek the birth-place of a native Stream" (9), positing his journey as a search for creative sources both in the natural and the imaginative world. Dislocating the reader from the river's source at the outset of the Duddon

sonnets is an important rhetorical move that forecasts the discovery of both a figurative and literal point of origin later in the volume.

However, if the reader expects to find this mysterious source in the sonnet series, he or she will be disappointed. In fact, as Wordsworth progresses on his journey, he finds nothing in the natural world that gives any clues as to where the river's source can be found. He writes in Sonnet III,

so hath nature lent
 To thy beginning nought that doth present
 Peculiar ground for hope to build upon.
 To dignify the spot that gives thee birth,
 No sign of hoar Antiquity's esteem
 Appears, and none of modern Fortune's care; (6-10)

Despite this less than encouraging start, Wordsworth presses on. As he follows Duddon's banks, Wordsworth's search for the river's source prompts musing and inquiry about the historical and cultural beginnings of the regions in the North of England. However, throughout the sonnet series, every effort to trace historical or cultural markers in the landscape is thwarted.

Wordsworth writes in Sonnet XXVIII that the earth is "blank" (10) to him. And the harder he looks, the less he finds. In Sonnet II Wordsworth laments the extinction of ancient forests and animals, the earliest inhabitants of the land; in Sonnet VIII, the earth and the air are "mute" to the poet's ponderings on ancient tribal life; the "traceable vestiges" of a regional fairy story are absent in Sonnet XI; in Sonnet XV, a carved rock is too worn for the poet to discern if it has been "by mortals sculptured" or "fashioned by the turbulence of waves" (9, 13); in Sonnet XXVIII there is no record of lives lost in territorial conflicts either in the regional annals or on the

battlegrounds; even ancient ruins, such as the Roman fort and the Druid circle in Sonnet XVII are sinking away “deep into patient Earth” (14).

By emphasizing the elision of historical and cultural markers in the physical landscape, Wordsworth effectively imposes a kind of negative space upon the natural world that wants to be filled. The original history of the Lakes is shrouded in darkness and the reader waits expectantly for Wordsworth’s bardic genius to bring it into light. With all traces to the past erased, Wordsworth is free to claim the Lake District as his own and to reconstruct it as an aesthetic space. Nature becomes a signifier of Wordsworth’s aesthetics, of his poetic program—of Wordsworth himself. As Scott Hess observes,

“Nature” in this sense refers to more than an external, nonhuman world: it is a way of seeing, a cultural practice, and a resource for the construction of specific forms of individual and collective imagination and identity. When we see “nature” . . . we see genius—a genius in which we thereby hope to participate, shaping our own identities and imaginations according to a pattern that Wordsworth played a central role in establishing. (84)

Just as Wordsworth describes Wallace’s fame in Scotland as permeating the landscape in his prefatory lines to the poem “Composed at Cora Linn, In Sight of Wallace’s Tower,” Wordsworth hopes that his name will also “be found, like a wild flower / All over his dear Country” and that his spirit, like Wallace’s will linger on “To people the steep rocks and river banks” (110).

In “Topographical Description,” Wordsworth figuratively transports readers to the Lake District’s point of origin and invites them to participate with him as he reimagines its creative beginning and reinscribes the landscape with signifiers bearing marks of himself. Mimicking the pattern of the biblical creation, Wordsworth first presents the Lake District as a void which he

then imaginatively fills with living things. He instructs readers to “recall to . . . mind the shapes of the vallies” and then to “people” them with “lakes and rivers,” “pools and torrents,” and to “bind” the land to the sea (194). Nature, untouched by human intervention, teems with activity: the sea “dashes” against the shore, the wind “sweeps” over the lakes, the woods “shed” and “renew” their leaves, the “birds and the beasts of prey” rule over other animal in the “natural” order of creation. And as God looked upon the world and pronounced it good, so Wordsworth looks over this creation and sees nature in a state of perfect “balance” and harmony (249). In this dramatic scene, nature submits to the dominion of Wordsworth’s omniscient poetic vision. He places himself as the ultimate authority figure at the very point in which the Lakes imaginatively came into existence. As creator, Wordsworth’s retelling of the history of the Lakes becomes not just another perspective in a tradition of competing narratives, but the master narrative.

We are led to this pivotal and centralizing place in “Topographical Description” from the Duddon sonnets by following the textual allusions Wordsworth makes through cross-reference. For example, in Sonnet II, Wordsworth describes the extinction of ancient animals, namely the bison and the leigh deer who existed “Thousand of years before the silent air / Was pierced by whizzing shaft of hunter keen!” (13-14). Wordsworth’s prose description of the deep history of the Lake District also includes a direct reference to these animals: “such was the state and appearance of this region when the aboriginal colonists of the Celtic tribes . . . became joint tenants with the wolf, the boar, the wild bull, the red deer, and the leigh, a gigantic species of deer which has long been extinct” (249).⁵ While these creatures have all been wiped out in the sonnet, they

⁵ The footnote to line 11 of sonnet II states: “the deer alluded to is the Leigh, a gigantic species long since extinct” (4). Wordsworth’s choice to repeat the language in *Topographical Description* serves as another textual link between the poem and the prose.

are restored back to into existence through Wordsworth's recreation of the Lake District. In "Topographical Description" these animals are also part of Wordsworth's extended argument against inhabitants of whose "bad tastes" differ from Wordsworth's vision of the Lake District. Wordsworth laments that over time, the relationship between man and nature has been thrown out of kilter, digressing into rants against the introduction of "foreign" practices, such as ornamental gardening, which deface the aesthetic beauty of the land and cheapen the taste of the general population.

What Wordsworth finds most frustrating is that these practices are motivated by "feeling[s] natural and honourable to the human mind, viz. the pleasure which it receives from distinct ideas, and from the perception of order, regularity, and contrivance" (278). In other words, Wordsworth argues that these practices are motivated by the impulse to organize and collect. Wordsworth concedes that collecting—ordering and arranging things into systematic patterns—is instinctive and that the human mind is hardwired to derive pleasure from collections; however, for tourists (and readers) Wordsworth fears that these impulses have been misdirected into a love of "harsh contrast" rather than an appreciation for the "fine gradations" which Wordsworth takes to mark most "natural" forms of organization and arrangement (279). Wordsworth's anxieties about the disappearance of wooded forests and beasts described in Sonnet II and even the erasure of national monuments described in Sonnet XII are implicitly connected to his more pressing concern about a general loss of taste and feeling that threatens to supplant Wordsworth as proprietor and chief authority of the Lakes.

Conclusion

The Duddon sonnets, "Vaudracour and Julia," the Other Poems, and the "Topographical Description" demonstrate Wordsworth's sophistication in crafting a literary volume that works

together as an organic whole. The first three parts of the volume carve space for Wordsworth to inscribe his poetic vision and illustrate, through poetic figuration, the aesthetic principles described in “Topographical Description.” Reciprocally, “Topographical Description” establishes Wordsworth’s authority as a “Lake poet” and reinforces his determination to shape his reception among a specific class of readers.

Although the Duddon volume in its original configuration was in some ways ephemeral, when we consider the way its components speak to each other we do become better readers of Wordsworth. We begin to meet the demanding task of synthesizing his work and becoming more aware of his skill not only as a celebrant of the Lake District, but also as a collector. We come to understand how Wordsworth thinks on the level of the *book*, not merely on the level of the lyric poem.

Ultimately the spirit that unifies the disparate parts of *The River Duddon* is a spirit of stability, of resilience, and of place-grounded creative genius. In the final sonnet of the Duddon series, which Wordsworth aptly titled “Conclusion,” he presents the reader with an image that blends together the ideas of genius and permanence—ideas that take their power from the contrasting recognition of human transience:

For *backward*, Duddon! As I cast my eyes,
 I see what was, and is, and will abide;
 Still glides the Stream, and shall for ever glide;
 The Form remains, the Function never dies;
 While *we*, the brave, the mighty, and the wise,
 We men, who in our morn of youth defied
 The elements, must vanish; —be it so!

Enough, if something from our hands have power

To live, and act, and serve the future hour; (1-9)

While *The River Duddon* reveals Wordsworth's anxieties about the preservation of his loved native region and his future as a poet, "Conclusion" finishes with a profound sense of resolution and optimism. Perhaps, it suggests, this very book will live to serve the future hour. It will be more likely to do so if readers apprehend its "Form" and "Function."

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