

What Interpretive Divergence Can Teach Literary Semantics: Reconsidering Wordsworth's 'A slumber did my spirit seal'¹

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Introduction

This paper aims by way of a test case to show how literary studies in general and literary semantics in particular could broaden its scope by embracing a holistic view of literary communication that seeks to take into account its intentional, textual and interpretive aspects. In a sense, it is a companion piece to my 'multidimensional' re-readings of *Huckleberry Finn* and Frank Norris's *The Octopus* and their criticism on the basis of a tentative pragmatics of literary interpretation (see Pettersson 1999a, Pettersson 2002: 244-247 and Pettersson 1999b).

The test case is one of William Wordsworth's so-called 'Lucy' poems, 'A slumber did my spirit seal', a short poem often used as a theoretical touchstone in literary-theoretical debates in the late twentieth century. I shall start by quoting the poem and reflecting on the theoretical intentionalist debate it has spawned; then go on to discuss the rather different discussion of the poem in Wordsworth criticism; and finally draw some conclusions on what interpretive divergence – even in the criticism of a single poem – might teach us.

Here is the poem in the first published version in the *Lyrical Ballads* edition of 1800.

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A slumber did my spirit seal,
I had no human fears:
She seem'd a thing that could not feel
The touch of earthly years.
No motion has she now, no force
She neither hears nor sees
Roll'd round in earth's diurnal course
With rocks and stones and trees!
(Brett and Jones 1963: 152)

Often critics do not discuss the version they are using, but in fact there are rather marked differences in punctuation (and, to a lesser extent, in orthography) in the 1850 version in *Poetical Works* (as quoted in Caraher 1991: 15; for a discussion of the different versions see 15-18, especially 18n6):

A slumber did my spirit seal;
I had no human fears:
She seemed a thing that could not feel
The touch of earthly years.

No motion has she now, no force;
She neither hears nor sees;
Rolled round in earth's diurnal course,
With rocks, and stones, and trees!

In brief, we may note that the semicolons and commas added to the 1850 version render the poem more staccato-like in rhythm.

Intentionalist Interpretations and Their Shortcomings

Since I feel that intentionalist positions have been underrated in the literary theory and criticism of the last few decades, let me first consider some such readings of Wordsworth's poem. An evaluation of the strengths and shortcomings of these intentionalist readings will, I hope, pave the way for a more comprehensive reading of the poem.

It was E. D. Hirsch, Jr., who in an appendix titled 'Objective Criticism' in his *Validity in Interpretation* (1967) first highlighted

the interpretive divergence in the criticism of 'A slumber did my spirit seal'. Hirsch's study is an intentionalist critique of new-critical positions, and its pages on Wordsworth's poem (in its final version) are intended as a refutation of René Wellek's notion of the most inclusive interpretation as the most correct (on Wellek's position see Hirsch 1967: 226-227). Hirsch takes two incompatible interpretations of the poem as examples of the untenability of the notion of interpretive inclusivity: Cleanth Brooks' reading, according to which 'she' in the poem is 'touched by and held by earthly time in its most powerful and horrible image' and that of F. W. Bateson, which holds that 'Lucy is actually more alive now that she is dead, because she is now part of the life of Nature, and not just a human "thing"' (both quoted in Hirsch 1967: 228).

Having proved that the two interpretations cannot be reconciled by a third inclusive reading, Hirsch (1967: 239) claims that adjudicating between the two readings should be done by establishing 'the most probable context' of the poem. But he establishes that context in rather sweeping biographical terms.

Instead of regarding rocks and stones and trees merely as inert objects, he [Wordsworth] probably regarded them in 1799 as deeply alive, as part of the immortal life of nature. [---] From everything we know of Wordsworth's typical attitudes during the period in which he composed the poem, inconsolability and bitter irony do not belong in its horizon.

Hence, although censoring Bateson for overstating his case, Hirsch (1967: 240) deems that 'since Bateson grounds his interpretation in a conscious construction of the poet's outlook, his reading must be deemed the more probable'. But even though Hirsch's quote from Bateson is longer than the one I provide above, Bateson does no such thing: his reading is as narrowly textualist as that of Brooks. He may, of course, be implying that Wordsworth held pantheist views, but does certainly not ground 'his interpretation in a conscious construction of the poet's outlook'. However, more important than the fact that Hirsch projects his view of Wordsworth's outlook at the time on Bateson's interpretation is Hirsch's theoretical point about trying to establish the most probable context by the

intentionalist endeavour consciously to construct the author's view of life when the poem was written.

More than a decade later another intentionalist, P.D. Juhl (1980: 70-82), returns to Wordsworth's poem. Just as in the case of the internal coherence of the poem, Juhl (1980: 82) claims that

it can be easily shown that to invoke complexity in support of an interpretation is to appeal to what the author is likely to have meant.

Juhl views the entire debate about the meaning of the poem as revolving around whether one interprets the line 'Rolled round in earth's diurnal course' as signifying 'gentle motion' (cf Bateson's reading) or 'violent motion' (cf Brooks' reading). He summarizes his position as follows.

'Since the words "in earth's diurnal course" are a more appropriate means to suggest gentle motion than to suggest violent motion, the author is more likely to have used them, and hence the phrase "rolled round," to suggest the former than the latter.' (Juhl 1980: 75)

Note what Juhl does: First, he narrows the interpretation of the entire poem to one line (with a mention of his presumption that the final position of 'trees' supports his reading); second, despite arguing a case for intentionalist interpretation, he mainly looks for *textual* evidence for two classic new-critical notions: coherence and complexity; and, third, in his final summary, as an intentionalist he blatantly puts the cart in front of the horse by maintaining that textual evidence and language use in general suggest that the gentle-motion reading is more appropriate and that *therefore* the author is more likely to have implied that reading.

Let me mention one final intentional instance in which Wordsworth's poem has been discussed. After his remarks on 'A slumber did my spirit seal' Juhl (1980: 82-86) goes on to discuss texts produced by chance, such as texts accidentally typed by a monkey or or produced on a rock by erosion. Apparently Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels (1982/1985: 15-24) take Juhl's remark as their cue to use Hirsch's and Juhl's positions as a backdrop for

introducing their own kind of intentionalism, which uses Wordsworth's poem as a mere instance of marks that waves washing up on a beach may have created. Their point is that such marks 'merely seem to *resemble* words' and that 'there is no such thing as intentionless language' (Knapp and Michaels 1982/1985: 16, 17). Hence, they add nothing to the interpretation of the poem as such. But in stating their case, Knapp and Michaels are of interest, not by defending the early Hirsch's (1967) point of equating the author's intention with the meaning of the text but by providing literary studies with the most strongly argued, allegedly anti-theoretical intentionalist theory. But, as W. J. T. Mitchell (1985a: 5) has pointed out, Knapp and Michaels 'seem quite indifferent to the question where the intention is discovered (in "the work itself," in ancillary documents, or in the author's testimony)'. In other words, they end up with a theory (which they claim is not a theory, but something superior) to which they provide little grounding in the very practice outside of which they claim 'no one can reach a position' (Knapp and Michaels 1982/1985: 30).

Before going on to Wordsworth criticism *per se*, let me sum up the three intentionalist positions discussed by considering Wordsworth's poem, which most likely was written in Germany in the last months of 1798 (see e.g. Gill 1989: 159 and Mason 1992: 246). All three are purportedly intentionalist in outlook, but in fact provide little grounding for their framework in interpretive practice, and even less as far as Wordsworth's poem is concerned. Hirsch (1967) may speak in rather general terms of 'everything we know of Wordsworth's typical attitudes during the period in which he composed the poem', but since he provides very little biographical or other ancillary evidence for his allegedly intentionalist reading of the poem and even falls prey to the rather common misdating of the poem (see the above quote from Hirsch 1967), his case stands on rather shaky ground. Juhl, on the other hand, does not even attempt to present any intentional substantiation but on the contrary relies on textual evidence, which makes him seem rather like the new critics he attacks. Knapp and Michaels in providing no practice on which to base their anti-theoretical intentionalist stance end up with

a position, which not only misrepresents Hirsch and Juhl (and their intentions) but floats in a theoretical stratosphere lacking the practical anchorage they suggest literary studies should have. Hence, three of the strongest intentionalist positions in literary theory in recent decades have discussed Wordsworth's poem, but have furnished literary criticism with rather little practical advice in how to go about defining the author's intention in general and Wordsworth's in penning 'A slumber did my spirit seal' in particular.

Towards a Holistic Reading of 'A slumber'

So how about Wordsworth criticism? Perhaps the first thing to note is that many commentators on *Lyrical Ballads* have simply neglected 'A slumber did my spirit seal' and thus implicitly suggested that it is one of its minor poems (for instance, some casebooks and special journal issues on *Lyrical Ballads*, such as Jones and Tydeman 1972, Campbell 1991 and Trott and Perry 1998, include no sustained discussion of it). Fair enough, but I would claim that although one of Wordsworth's lesser creations it does epitomize much that is central to *Lyrical Ballads* and to the young Wordsworth.

Of the criticism we do find on the poem (and on the 'Lucy' poems in general) much is directed at trying to pin down who Lucy is. This tendency is perhaps understandable as a vestige of the Romantic-biographical tradition in literary criticism, but it was still prevalent in the 1950s. Like Harold Bloom and Lionel Trilling (1973: 152), the editors of the *Romantic Poetry and Prose* volume of *The Oxford Anthology of English Literature*, I am tempted to side with H. M. Margoliouth's argument that 'she' in the 'Lucy' poems does not seem to be inspired by Wordsworth's sister Dorothy (even though even Coleridge thought so), nor by Anette or by Mary Hutchinson, but by Mary's younger sister Margaret (or Peggy), a dear friend who died of consumption in 1796 (see Margoliouth 1953: 52-53).

But perhaps more importantly we should keep in mind the self-evident fact that the motif of the death of a child, maiden or young man was prevalent in pre-Romantic poetry and was introduced to

Wordsworth at an impressionable age when at Hawkshead school his headmaster William Taylor 'instigated and encouraged' Wordsworth's 'earliest efforts', not least by 'the melancholy of the graveyard poets' he affected (Schneider 1957: 76). That is, the many Wordsworth critics who maintain that 'she' in the 'Lucy' poems is a complex creation and not directly inspired by any one person are most likely right, especially as concerns the most elusive and vague poem, 'A slumber did my spirit seal'. One might add that for Wordsworth there was plentiful possible non-literary inspiration of moribund thematics: his parents both died rather young; the village churchyard was right by Hawkshead school; his beloved tutor William Taylor died as a young man; and much of Wordsworth's early poetry exemplifies thematics related to the 'Lucy' poems (see Schneider 1957: 76-79, 243-244).

As you may have noticed, I have consistently employed inverted commas when referring to the 'Lucy' poems. Certainly the so-called 'Lucy' poems were composed at roughly the same time (in late 1798 and early 1799), but neither in *Lyrical Ballads* nor later did Wordsworth conceive of them as a suite. In fact, as is well known the four so-called 'Lucy' poems were finally placed in two different categories: 'Poems Founded on the Affections' ('She dwelt among th' untrodden ways' and 'Strange fits of passion have I known', both composed in the last months of 1798) and 'Poems of the Imagination' ('A slumber did my spirit seal' and 'Three years she grew in sun and shower', written in the last months of 1798 and in late February 1799, respectively) (see Caraher 1991: 16n1, 121 on Wordsworth's groupings and Mason 1992: 243-246, 299 on the dating of the poems; see also Davies 1965 and Caraher 1991: 27-37 for elaborate arguments against reading the 'Lucy' poems as a cycle of poems).

Now let us briefly compare the imagery of the poem with other poems by Wordsworth. Where else in the early Wordsworth do we come across similar imagery of a speaker contemplating a man or a woman in nature, with an awareness of its force and magnificence? Perhaps the most conspicuous instance of such imagery – in addition to that of the other 'Lucy' poems (on which see eg Durrant 1970) – is to be found in 'Lines (Written a few miles above Tintern Abbey)', composed in the July of 1798:

For I have learned
To look on nature, not as in the hour
Of thoughtless youth, but hearing oftentimes
The still, sad music of humanity,
Not harsh nor grating, though of ample power
To chasten and subdue. And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of the setting suns,
And the round ocean, and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man,
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things.
(ll. 89-103 in Brett and Jones 1963: 114)

Here, in a poem written less than half a year before 'A slumber did my spirit seal' we find what to me seems its motifically closest counterpart – and one that may help to clarify some of its vague and rather general imagery. As critics have observed, this passage seems to draw on Virgil's *Aeneid*, perhaps even on his *Georgics* (see Mason 1992: 212n). Still, this need not preclude that these lines – or indeed the second stanza in 'A slumber did my spirit seal' – also may be inspired by a reading of Newton's *Principia Mathematica* (which by the way includes a footnote to a passage about the pre-existence of the soul in the *Aeneid*; see Schneider 1957: 247). In fact, 'in his best poetry', as Ben Ross Schneider (1957: 249, 250) has pointed out, Wordsworth assumed 'a Copernican universe', and as early as in 1794 he decided to revise a poem written at Cambridge to fit 'the Newtonian reality'. Such a view finds support not only in Wordsworth's 'Preface' to *Lyrical Ballads* in which he considers at some length the affinities between the Poet and the Man of Science (see Mason 1992: 75-78), but also in J. A. V. Chapple's (1986: 144-146, 160-161) analysis of the interrelation of science and literature in 19th-century Britain and in Mary Midgley's (2001/2002: 55) recent claim that '[a]ll the great Ro-

manetics made [the] effort to bring both sides [science and literature] together, which is just what makes them great'.

The above lines from 'Tintern Abbey' suggest the enduring influence of Newtonian notions: 'motion' is compared to 'spirit' (see Newton's *Principia* as quoted in Durrant 1957: 101) and 'rolls through all things'. Furthermore, in the famous skating scene in Book First of 'The Prelude' (composed roughly contemporaneously with 'A slumber did my spirit seal'), Wordsworth was even more precise about the earth's motion: when skating

the solitary cliffs

Wheeled by me - even as if the earth had rolled

With visible motion her diurnal round!

('The Prelude', Book First, ll. 458-460 in Bloom and Trilling 1973: 196)

Now although Wordsworth often seems carefully to have grounded his poetical descriptions of nature and the heavens on the natural sciences he had studied at Cambridge, this does not mean that we should accept Geoffrey Durrant's (1970: vii) claim that his poems form a 'coherent poetic grammar' portraying Newton's 'great system' or that the image portrayed in 'A slumber did my spirit seal' is one in which 'the destructive forces [...] prevail'.

What I find patently missing in most readings of Wordsworth's poem is a holistic interpretation of it on the basis of what we actually know of the poet's life, reading, writing, studies and world view as it was composed. Before summing up some notions pertaining to such an admittedly sketchy interpretation let us consider one particular aspect that most critics have disregarded in their quest for the real-life model for Lucy and their quibble about whether her death is to be understood as tragic or simply as a natural occurrence in the grand scheme of things.

Only in Geoffrey Hartman (1971/1977) have I come across an emphasis, which tallies with the fact that Wordsworth grouped the poem among 'Poems of the Imagination' and that Wordsworth, just as in the above quote from 'Tintern Abbey' – a poem also included in 'Poems of the Imagination' –, introduces his ruminations on man and nature by an observing consciousness, a crucial notion in all of Wordsworth: 'A slum-

ber did *my* spirit seal, (*I*) *I* had no human fears'. Hartman (1971/1977: 158-159 emphasis original) simply points out that

it must be remembered that we view her ('Lucy') exclusively through the eyes of the speaker, so that the emphasis falls always on what she is to *him*, which strongly internalizes her meaning.

No reader of *Lyrical Ballads* and its preface, of 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality' or of 'The Prelude' could miss Wordsworth's highlighting of the perceiving consciousness, the influence of which on modern poetry is immeasurable. As Bloom and Trilling (1973: 125) have it: 'Before Wordsworth, the poetry had a subject. After Wordsworth, its prevalent subject was the poet's own subjectivity'.

To put it differently, everything we say about the entire poem – and the second stanza in particular – should be seen as filtered through the speaker's consciousness, just as in the lines quoted from 'Tintern Abbey' and 'The Prelude'. In fact, those motivationally related lines seem to suggest that although human death indeed is tragic, since 'she' in death lacks motion and force, there is some consolation in the fact that the earth keeps on turning, that life goes on. The final exclamation mark may even suggest that that realization is of some grandeur, perhaps even of some consolation – to the speaker, that is. (Although Coleridge most likely read the poem too biographically in surmising that the poem drew on Wordsworth's fear that his sister might die, 'A slumber did my spirit seal' seems to some extent to have consoled him in his grief when learning about the death of his son Berkeley in a letter from his friend Thomas Poole written in March 1799, since in his answer to Poole he includes the poem; the letter dated 6 April 1799 is discussed in Caraher 1991: 28-30, 124-125.) But as readers we may want to go further in our interpretation of the poem by, for instance, noting that the speaker did not have 'fears' *before* her death, which may suggest that he now harbours apprehension, perhaps even dread.

I myself would be inclined to find more affirmation than denunciation of life in the poem as a whole, that is, I would opt for a qualified Batesonian reading, if you like – perhaps based on Wordsworth's works

and his life and letters; perhaps owing to the orderly progress of the rhythm and rhyme of its simple but stately ballad metre; or perhaps owing to my interpretation (based on the above) of how the Newtonian view intriguingly is voiced but remains enveloped by the perceiving speaker's elation. Still, in the final analysis I find that Wordsworth's genius in this poem, as in all his *Lyrical Ballads*, lies in his shifts in language, consciousness and perspective and in his juxtaposition of vivid and moving notions and images on different levels. Or, as Patrick Campbell (1991: 162) notes, we should not 'diminish the sense of paradox and surprise that informs *Lyrical Ballads*, whereby our anticipations need constantly to be revised and modified'.

Broadening the Field of Literary Semantics: Caraher's Reading of 'A slumber'

Before drawing conclusions on the interpretive divergence as concerns Wordsworth's poem and the somewhat hesitant manner in which – in part, at least – I have tried to settle it, let me discuss another central monograph. Brian G. Caraher's *Wordsworth's "Slumber" and the Problematics of Reading* (1991) is a study theoretically and critically entirely centring on this one poem by Wordsworth. I have left Caraher last in my discussion, since his book conveniently summarizes most of the critical controversy in a way that seems to me to some extent symptomatic of literary semantics and even – expressly in Caraher's case – of literary pragmatics.

Caraher argues at length for no less than three different but supposedly mutually compatible readings: one according to which 'she' has an antecedent in 'my spirit' and so that the entire poem is about the speaker's spirit, which dies a vicarious death; another according to which the poem is one of the 'Lucy' poems and hence that 'she' refers to the dead girl (see Caraher 1991: 27-44). His third reading suggests that the syntax of the first line may read as "My spirit" sealed "a slumber" and since hence the agent in the poem 'appears cold-blooded, as if inhuman', Caraher (1991: 45-81, quotes 45, 45-46) claims that "[t]he speaker chillingly confesses a murder'. At first glance this may seem rather far-fetched an interpretation, but

Caraher tries at length to prove (though I for one am not entirely convinced) that such a reading would be in line with the tradition of Romantic death fantasy with which Wordsworth was well acquainted.

However, Caraher's (1991: 81) point is expressly not that the poem is ambiguous, but that all three readings are possible, since it simply represents 'a striking exercise in understanding'. This leads him to plead for the kind of literary interpretation that is aware of how the reading of a poem like 'A slumber did my spirit seal' can be 'problem-generating' and thus hold the various readings in suspension, precisely because so many of its features cannot interpretively be decided on once and for all (Caraher 1991: 83).

Caraher goes through the entire spectrum of literary theorists and critics who have commented on the poem. Of the intentionalists he dismisses Juhl's as well as Knapp and Michaels' readings in footnotes as based on 'oversimplification' and 'unexamined theoretical assumptions' (Caraher 1991: 74n13, 66-67n3). Hirsch's view is also found untenable, since Hirsch lets his theoretical stance override the actual critical interpretation. That is, as I noted above, Hirsch sides with Bateson's reading, but briefly provides 'the most probable context' himself in accordance with the intentional grounding he thinks criticism should have (see Caraher 1991: 73-74).

Textual critics fare even worse in Caraher's study. The interpretive stances by no lesser authorities than Norman Holland, Paul de Man, J. Hillis Miller and Geoffrey Hartman are – after quite thorough analyses – straightforwardly termed 'textual murders':

The undermining, bypassing, or rejecting of the temporal interaction of work and reader and the complexities and particulars of the activity of reading yield critical fatalities: dehumanized and textualized readers, insubstantialized and detextualized texts, dehumanized and displaced temporality, and the sacrifice and burial of the evidence of the activity of reading. (Caraher 1991: 98-99)

After such rather scathing critique of intentionalists, textualists and one reader psychologist (Holland), Caraher (1991: 238) is ready to present his 'four definitive features of a literary experience', drawing

on the philosophies of John Dewey and Stephen Pepper and the reader-oriented theories of David Bleich and Louise Rosenblatt:

(1) a literary work, (2) a reader, (3) the activity of reading - that is to say, the temporal interaction of work and reader, and (4) the quality or qualities developed and made distinct within and through the temporal interaction of work and reader.

We might query many aspects of Caraher's study: Is not the rather stark rhetoric when dismissing other readings of 'A slumber did my spirit seal' rather unwarranted? How tenable are Caraher's three interpretations of the poem and can we really hold them simultaneously? Is the 'problem-generating' reading really that different from new-critical notions such as ambiguity or vagueness? And most importantly: Are there really only four features of literary experience and are they really definite and immutable?

But the main point this case study of 'A slumber did my spirit seal' has led me to is this: Caraher's view of literary experience seems symptomatic in the sense that (1) it narrows literary communication to the literary work and its reading, even to the point of committing what I have termed *the interactional fallacy* (the literary work and the reader allegedly *interact*, as if an object like the literary work could perform as an agent; see Pettersson 1999b: 49), and (2) it rather casually dismisses intentional and biographical-contextual aspects of the communicative spectrum, mainly owing to the fact that the intentionalists discussed cannot cut the mustard.

Conclusion: Interpretive Divergence, Contextualist Intention Inference and Literary Studies

Now I too started out by briefly assessing intentionalist readings of Wordsworth's poems, but went on to suggest that intentional aspects can be studied with greater theoretical acumen and critical precision. In the last two decades scholars in literary semantics have done a wonderful job by analysing textual features and interpretive constraints. But I would suggest that the comparative neglect of intentional aspects in the spectrum of literary communication has led to the fact that the very

foundations of literary semantics have not been as robust as they might. In fact, this widespread tendency in literary studies has contributed to the kind of interpretive divergence studied in this paper.

There seems to be a renewed interest in the critical discussion of authorial intention in literary studies – however, not for the most part in the strong theoretical forms evinced by the theoreticians discussed at the start of this paper but in modified positions recently advanced in philosophical aesthetics (by Jerrold Levinson, Paisley Livingston, Gary Iseminger and Noël Carroll; see Pettersson 1999b: 55-56) and by psychologists and cognitive scholars, such as Raymond W. Gibbs, Jr. (1999). As I tried to show by my brief and tentative discussion of intentional and biographical features based on the poem itself, other poems by Wordsworth, his life, letters and reading as well as on other ancillary documents, such contextualist intention inference (as I have termed it elsewhere; see Pettersson 1999b: 57) may be the best way to hold excessive interpretive divergence in check. That is, if the pursuit of authorial intention is to have some validity in literary studies, it must be analysed in conjunction with the other parameters in literary communication: the literary work (and the oeuvre of which it is part), its mediation and reception.

Still, the critical disagreement as concerns Wordsworth's poem may suggest other things. We can learn how a meta-critical analysis of interpretive divergence may be of use to practical criticism and how it can clarify implicit or explicit theoretical and critical predispositions. Perhaps critical – and pedagogical – reflection on interpretive divergence can help us be more wary when devising praxis-free literary theories or providing one-sided interpretations of complex works of literature.

What is more, literary studies in general and literary semantics in particular would do well to expand their efforts to study the entire spectrum of literary communication – so that Wordsworth, among others, need not sit on his cloud, shake his head and perhaps mumble: 'A slumber did the critics seal'.

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