

# The Self-conscious Narrator in Wordsworth's "Simon Lee"

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## Abstract

In his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth declares his effort to refine the reader's sensibility. He thus attempts, not at telling a sensational tale, but at deliberately shaping a consciousness. A patently obvious case is "Simon Lee," his poetic manifesto of what we may call a reactionary ballad. The poem features contradictory statements, counter-expectations, and authorial intrusion. Alienated from the plot, the reader is encouraged to make his own tale (to write his own text, so to speak) of Simon Lee. In the paradoxical conclusion of the poem, the narrator, who has asked his reader to think, "guides" the latter's response. Eventually, both Wordsworth the poet-narrator and Simon Lee become impressive characters in the poem.

## 摘要

華滋華斯在《抒情歌謠》(*Lyrical Ballads*)的序言中公開發明他有心提升讀者的感性。他試圖避免煽情的故事，而致力於刻畫人物並描述其意識。一個明顯的例子是可以視為華氏詩歌宣言的〈塞門李〉("Simon Lee")一詩。本詩充滿互相矛盾的陳述、處處違反讀者的預期、作者且不時介入詩中——這些特點造成了讀者與故事情節之間的疏離。敘述者更公然鼓勵他的讀者自行杜撰（或任意改寫）老塞門的故事。最後全詩以一段弔詭式感言結束。敘述者既已慫恿讀者自行構思，卻又同時「引導」後者的反應。因而詩中予人印象深刻的人物除了塞門，還有敘述者華滋華斯本人。

The moving accident is not my trade,  
To curl the blood I have no ready arts;  
'Tis my delight, alone in summer shade,  
To pipe a simple song to thinking hearts.

Hart-Leap Well, ll. 97-100<sup>1</sup>

William Wordsworth has often been regarded as a poet of nature, but he is no less a poet of man,

On Man, on Nature, and on Human Life,  
Musing in solitude . . . .

("Prospectus" to *The Recluse*, ll. 1-2)

Later in the poem he declares that "the Mind of Man" is "[his] haunt, and the main region of [his] song" ("Prospectus," ll. 40-41).<sup>2</sup> This special concern for the human mind is significant,

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<sup>1</sup>For the present discussion, all references to Wordsworth's poems, unless otherwise noted, are taken from Stephen Gill, ed. *William Wordsworth*.

<sup>2</sup>These lines are quoted from John O. Hayden, ed., *William Wordsworth: The Poems Volume Two*.

for it not only has a bearing on Wordsworth's subject matter but also makes him a consciously didactic, if not exactly moralistic, poet. Wordsworth makes no bones about his disgust with the bad taste of some of his contemporaries. Calling the Lyrical Ballads an "experiment," he asserts in the Preface<sup>3</sup> that each poem in the work has a "worthy purpose" (447), and that all of them are to create a new taste to be enjoyed. Disapproving of the "gaudiness and inane phraseology of many modern writers" (446) and of contemporary indulgence in "arbitrary and capricious habits of expression" (447), he reminds his reader that "the human mind is capable of being excited without the application of gross and violent stimulants" (448-49). Since man has the innate capability to perceive beauty and dignity, a writer should strive "to produce or enlarge this capability" in the reader, which Wordsworth believes is one of the writer's best services (449). If the writer is thus engaged, Wordsworth asserts, "the understanding of the Reader must necessarily be in some degree enlightened, and his affections strengthened and purified" (448).

This conscious effort to educate his reader, to create a healthy taste, to refine the reader's sensibility is patently obvious in his poetry. As a result, what stands out in his poems, as opposed to the works of many of his contemporaries, is oftentimes not the exciting telling of a sensational tale but a deliberate shaping of a consciousness; not necessarily the creation of a moving plot but certainly the molding of the mind or character. The poet, which in this case is identical with his narrator, thus becomes highly self-conscious-conscious of his role as narrator, of his relationship with the subject matter and with his reader.

"Simon Lee," written in 1798, demonstrates precisely such a self-conscious poet-narrator. In this paper, I will first briefly point out the difference between "Simon Lee" and its contemporary ballads. From thence I will explicate the poem in light of the quadruple roles of the narrator as outsider, intruder, reader, and poet. As Andrew L. Griffin in his "Wordsworth and the Problem of Imaginative Story: The Case of 'Simon Lee'" has observed, "the principal characters" in the poem are "speaker and hearer, poet and reader" (393). "The real concern" of the poem, he goes on to argue, "is tale-telling and tale-listening, in confused conflict with the poetic imagination: in other words, the problem of imaginative story" (393). Don H. Bialostosky in *Making Tales: The Poetics of Wordsworth's Narrative Experiments*, which contains an illuminating interpretation of the poem, also discusses the narrator's relationship with his subject matter (Simon) and the reader (51-54, 74-81). In a more recent book, *Wordsworth, Dialogics, and the Practice of Criticism*, Bialostosky further defines the roles played by the narrator in this poem (268). All this goes to confirm the assertion of J. F. Danby, made more than three decades ago, that "Simon Lee" is an outstanding example of Wordsworth's "art at its subtlest, its least pretentious and plainest" (196). That unpretentious subtlety, I submit, is achieved through a conscious manipulation of the narrator's quadruple roles mentioned above.

<sup>3</sup>All the citations from the Preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* (1800) are taken from *Selected Poems and Prefaces* by William Wordsworth, edited by Jack Stillinger.

## I

In mid-1790s, the German poet Gottfried Burger's ballads, along with others, created a stir that eventually led to a revival of the genre. In the words of his translator William Taylor, Burger's chief strength lies in "manly sentiment and force of style":

His extraordinary powers of language are founded on a rejection of the conventional phraseology of regular poetry, in favour of popular forms of expression, caught by the listening artist from the voice of agitated nature.

Taylor also praises the "hurrying vigour of [Burger's] impetuous diction" as "unrivalled" (*Monthly Magazine*, i [March 1796], 118; qtd. in Jacobus 218). Such being the case, it is reasonable to assume that Wordsworth, who also advocated plain and everyday diction, might have shared Burger's view on language. Yet Wordsworth was not uncritical of Burger's poetic tactics. In a letter to Coleridge in late 1798 he complained that, other than "a hurry of pleasure," little impression worthy of remembrance is left after reading Burger's book:

. . . I have few distinct forms that people my mind, nor any recollection of delicate or minute feelings which he has either communicated to me, or taught me to recognize. I do not perceive the presence of character in his personages. I see everywhere the character of Burger himself. . . . (qtd. in Jacobus 220)

From the censure it becomes clear what Wordsworth's own preference is. He prizes character over incident. As he puts it, "in poems descriptive of human nature, however short they may be, character is absolutely necessary, &c.: incidents are among the lowest allurements of poetry" (quoted in Jacobus 220). Consequently, in his own ballads the spotlight falls on the character; the most alluring part of the poem is what he terms "the thinking heart" or a state of mind.

"Simon Lee" may be read as Wordsworth's poetic manifesto of his own brand of ballad, a revolt against contemporary ballads in which incidents are favored. For even though the poem's full title—"Simon Lee, the Old Huntsman with an incident in which he was concerned"—specifies "an incident," that incident is not the emphasis of the poem. Nor, for Wordsworth, is incident synonymous with tale. According to John E. Jordan, poems "labeled 'tales' were, indeed, common to the point of becoming a fad around the time of the *Lyrical Ballads*"; Wordsworth, who refuses "to use the common generic tag of 'tale'" in his volume, "is exceedingly and uncommonly chary of any genre designations in the 1798 edition" (142, 144). When he does use narrative tales in his poems, they are categorically different from those of his contemporaries. That is to say, he redefines tales. Unlike his "typically genre conscious" contemporaries (Jordan 144), Wordsworth flies "in the face of accepted practice" by deliberately "crossing the genres" and adding lyrical element to the ballads (Griffin 393).

This additional lyrical quality is a "distinctive, even original feature" (Parrish 119) of *Lyrical Ballads* that demands special attention, for it "points to the subjective concerns of the poet" (Hamilton 61). Analyzing "Simon Lee," we find that the poet, as he narrates, internalizes the "incident," thus giving the tale a strong personal touch. More important, his subjective concerns include the ways in which a story should be told or a poem read. Despite the fact

that the full title of "Simon Lee" suggests a conventional story and that, furthermore, its conventional beginning promises a traditional public figure, the expectation of such a story or figure is never met. The "incident" itself turns out to be rather trivial--the hewing of a stump and how it affects Simon and the narrator. On the surface, the "he" that was concerned in the incident refers to Simon. But, never "objectively" presented, "he" is in fact an internalized Simon. Every time the narrator introduces a detail about Simon's past, he also gives a view of Simon's present, with the result that the reader sees a double vision of Simon. The poet-narrator manipulates the story in such a way that he becomes a character in the story he narrates. As the poem develops, even the reader is openly asked to participate in the making of the story.

Besides such unexpected turns in the story-telling, there is the curious authorial intrusion that warns the reader not to expect a tale in the ordinary sense of the word--that is, a story with lots of happenings which enchant the reader to listen enthusiastically though passively. "Simon Lee" is no such tale even though, with Simon's romantic past in striking contrast with his miserable present, it could very well be one. Yet, while Wordsworth wills it to be "no tale," he adds, paradoxically: "should you think, / Perhaps a tale you'll make it" (ll. 79-80). Since the warning comes right before the narrator recounts the cutting of "the tangled root," Wordsworth obviously wants the reader to pay special attention to the incident. He formally and publicly calls on the reader to cooperate actively with him in forming the story or giving it a proper ending (tale/tail). This authorial intrusion, in much the same way Bertolt Brecht alienates his audience, distances the reader from the tale itself and, instead, calls attention to the art of reading.

## II

From the beginning, we find contradictory statements in the narration.<sup>4</sup> For instance, as the ballad unfolds, we hear about "a little man" (l. 3) in the "sweet shire of Cardigan" (l. 1), yet the observation is immediately contradicted by "I've heard he once was tall" (l. 4), as if a legendary figure were going to emerge. But right after that line we come to realize that he is old and burden- weary. Uncertainty is suggested by the two versions of Simon's age, though they both point to his oldness: "He says he is three score and ten, / But others say he's eighty" (ll. 7-8). Similarly, in the second stanza, the narrator gives two accounts of Simon's appearance. The statement

A long blue livery-coat has he,  
That's fair behind, and fair before;

is immediately undercut by another statement:

Yet, meet him where you will, you see  
At once that he is poor.

(ll. 9-12)

<sup>4</sup>I owe much of my awareness of this aspect of the poem to Bialostosky, *Making Tales* 78-80.

Thus, early on in the poem is established the dominant mode of the poem: contradiction or subversion. What is the purpose of all this?

Bialostosky sees all the "discrepant accounts" as "classic invitations to thought" (*Making Tales* 53). Upon examination, we find that one version of Simon comes from hearsay; the other from the narrator's own observation or internalization. Such an arrangement tells us, first, that the narrator is "an outsider to Simon Lee's community" (Bialostosky, *Wordsworth* 268) who notices the discrepancy between what he hears and what he sees. The disagreements about Simon's size and age arouse the outsider's interest and sharpen his observation. Second, the narrator calls the reader's attention to the difference between what Simon wishes to keep up and what his real condition is. As Bialostosky correctly observes, "The 'long blue livery coat' which he has kept 'fair behind, and fair before' testifies to the piety with which he keeps his later days bound to his earlier ones" (*Making Tales* 78). Yet right after remarking on the fair show of his livery, the narrator takes note of Simon's all too obvious poverty. In retrospect, the reader is reminded of what is left *unsaid* about the state of the body that has the livery on. What survives Simon's good old days, the narrator tactfully implies, is perhaps only the fair uniform; and even that uniform suggests his present poor condition.

In the same manner, the next four lines of the poem continue to give a double vision of Simon's past and present.

Full five and twenty years he lived  
A running huntsman merry;  
And, though he has but one eye left,  
His cheek is like a cherry.

(ll. 13-16)

Simon's ruddy cheek reaffirms his link with the glorious past, for it marks the physical excitement of the former hunting days (Bialostosky, *Making Tales* 79). The feminine rhyme of "merry" and "cherry" is not only comical, thus enhancing Simon's merriment and cheerfulness; it also suggests the pleasure Simon derived from hunting. Both the loss of an eye and the cherry-like cheek are pointers of the past, but by introducing the former in a subordinate clause, the narrator highlights Simon's continual passion for hunting and his sustained high spirit. In the next stanza, the narrator, as if to keep up with the uplifting account, tells his reader that Simon was famous at least in four counties and, "full of glee," he could sound the horn the loudest. But, reminiscences aside, the picture of the present-day Simon is grim:

His master's dead, and no one now  
Dwells in the hall of Ivor;  
Men, dogs, and horses, all are dead;  
He is the sole survivor.

(ll. 21-24)

Having thus isolated the old man, the narrator in stanzas four and five focuses on Simon's present condition: he is one-eyed, weak-limbed, childless, lean, sick, swollen-ankled,

thin-legged. Indeed, Simon has been reduced to being "the weakest in the village" (l. 40). And yet, just when the romantic aura begins to fade amid all the extremities, the narrator reaffirms Simon's inseparable link to the past. Stanza six begins with an account of how this weakest villager used to outrun "all the country"; and it goes on to remark:

And still there's something in the world  
At which his heart rejoices;  
For when the chiming hounds are out,  
He dearly loves their voices!

(ll. 45-48)

Again, we see this longing for continual identification with the past--this time it goes deeper than mere physical appearance.

But again "the theme of continuity between young and old Simon is countered by the observation of discontinuity between his present and former statures" (Bialostosky, *Making Tales* 78). For, juxtaposed with Simon's most exhilarating experiences is the narrator's subtle and disheartening comment, in stanza seven, on the Lees' present situation:

And though you with your utmost skill  
From labour could not wean them,  
Alas! 'tis very little, all  
Which they can do between them.

(ll. 53-56)

The narrator makes it clear that Simon's life has almost come full circle. Like a baby, the old man is helpless; unlike a baby, he cannot be weaned from work. Earlier Simon is said to be "forced to work, though weak" (l. 39); here he and his wife seem to cling to work--of their own accord. On the other hand, the narrator takes pains to remind the reader how futile the old couple's efforts are. Much as Simon and Ruth want to work, it is "very little" that they can accomplish. Indeed, as the narrator laments in the next stanza,

.....what avails the land to them,  
Which they can till no longer?

(ll. 63-64)

Moreover, the narrator observes how injury is added to impotence:

For still, the more he works, the more  
His poor old ancles swell.

(ll. 67-68)

With this emphasis on the sad circumstances surrounding Simon, the poet-narrator abruptly--right in the middle of stanza nine--ends his mixed, often contradictory, accounts of Simon's past and present, which constitute the first part of the poem.

### III

At this juncture, a surprise move by the poet-narrator marks the beginning of the second part of the poem. As has been noted, he is an outsider who intrudes into Simon's world

and the reader's imagination (Bialostosky, *Wordsworth* 268); now he thrusts himself forward to address the reader directly: "My gentle reader, I perceive / How patiently you've waited," adding, somewhat apologetically, "And I'm afraid that you expect / Some tale will be related" (ll. 69- 72). But the apology is soon replaced by a mild remonstrance:

O reader! had you in your mind  
Such stores as silent thought can bring,  
O gentle reader! you would find  
A tale in everything.

(ll. 73-76)

The fact that the narrator insists on calling his listener "gentle" reader indicates that he expects him to be different from ordinary readers--those perhaps who enjoy complicated, sensational stories. For he goes on to plead:

What more I have to say is short,  
I hope you'll kindly take it;  
It is no tale; but should you think,  
Perhaps a tale you'll make it.

(ll. 77-80)

While he again insists that his is "no tale," he reiterates that the "gentle" reader, as long as he is willing to "think," can "make a tale" out of it.

This intrusive prologue to the "tale" may also be seen as an instance of "discontinuity"--indicating an inconsistency in the development of the story that parallels the inconsistency in the description of Simon observed earlier. An extension of the pattern of defamiliarization, with which by now the reader is familiar, the disruption serves the "worthy purpose" of undercutting sentimentality, for it distances the reader, and puts his "thinking heart" to work. In so doing, Wordsworth breaks the ground in tale-telling, turning it to tale-making, in which the reader is expected to take active part.

The tale, as Wordsworth rightly insists, is "no tale," and, especially when compared with the lengthy prologue, is short enough. Simon Lee was trying to cut off "a stump of rotten wood" (l. 84), but "So vain was his endeavour / That at the root of the old tree / He might have worked for ever" (ll. 86-88). The narrator, who chanced upon this scene, approached Simon and offered help, which Simon received "right gladly." What happened next appears normal and well within expectation:

I struck, and with a single blow  
The tangled root I severed,  
At which the poor old man so long  
And vainly had endeavoured.

(ll. 93-96)

So also seems the reaction of "the poor old man":

The tears into his eyes were brought,  
And thanks and praises seemed to run

So fast out of his heart, I thought  
They never would have done.

(ll. 97-100)

Had Wordsworth's tale ended here, it would have been an "ordinary" tale after all; and feeble as it is, it would have met the general reader's expectation of a tale, where incident takes precedence. Strangely, however, Wordsworth adds to his tale a tail that has entailed much discussion. The poem concludes with a rather curious, unconventional observation, which to my mind constitutes the third and last part of the poem:

-I've heard of hearts unkind, kind deeds  
With coldness still returning.  
Alas! the gratitude of men  
Has oftner left me mourning.

(ll. 101-4)

Why such a tale? Why this particular incident? And, more important, why this conclusion? If, as Jordan suggests, this uneventful tale is meant to show the impotence of old age (167), there is no need to tag it with this puzzling comment. It appears to me that the conclusion, which is the crux of the entire poem, contains an "incident" that involves both Simon and the narrator. To appreciate it fully one must understand what Simon's profuse tears and thanks and praises mean to the narrator. What brought "tears" into this cheerful old man's eyes when he had "right gladly" received the "proffer'd aid"? If they are just plainly grateful tears, why should his "gratitude" have left the narrator "mourning"? Mark Jones theorizes:

Tears, which are both silent and expressive, can be read in many ways, and in referring the tears to his own "kind deed," the speaker is actually kinder to himself than to Simon. The manner of his deed is "unkind," since it sharpens the contrast between the speaker's vigor and Simon's impotence. (586)

Jones goes on to argue that the narrator's report of his feat "suggests pride in a show of strength" and is thus "a self-aggrandizing act of power over Simon"; Simon's tears, then, are "tears of rage or frustration" (586). As the first part of the poem clearly indicates, the strong, vigorous Simon belongs to a glorious age long past. Nevertheless, he clings to it--the root of an old tree--with all his might, even though from an outsider's viewpoint

So vain was his endeavour  
That at the root of the old tree  
He might have worked for ever.

(ll. 86-88)

By working endlessly on the stump, Simon is actually preserving himself, giving himself the illusion that he is still like his old self. Now "with a single blow," the narrator "sever'd" what Simon has so long and vainly "endeavour'd" to preserve.

The crushing force was not felt by the narrator until he saw tears burst into Simon's eyes and gratitude gush out of his heart. All of a sudden it dawned on him that he might not have done a kind deed after all. Through unthoughtfulness his single blow also severed



"the artery of Simon's self-respect"; and Simon's thanks and praises seemed "to flow from a mortal, unstanchable wound" (Bialostosky 77). The narrator's best intention not only succeeded in "solving" Simon's problem, but also resulted in hurting the old man unwittingly. The narrator hurt Simon's ego, when he least wanted to do it and when Simon was least expecting it; he killed Simon with kindness. The narrator mourns, for Simon of course, but perhaps also for man's sad, inescapable mortality and for the inherent paradox in human nature.

If this reading may be sustained, the narrator's being an outsider-turned-intruder also accounts in large measure for the unexpected turn of event. For as an outsider, he does not know that Simon's past "restores a dignity and meaning to Simon's present condition" (Bialostosky, *Making Tales* 78). Its full significance lies hidden from superficial observation and hearsay. Thus, when he chances to see the old man being "overtasked," instinctively he lends him a helping hand, little suspecting what that innocent offer would bring. If the speaker did *intend* to demonstrate his strength, he would not be so bothered-- indeed, conscience-struck-by the incident, nor would he conclude the narration with such a heavy-hearted mourning.

#### IV

The narrator is an intruder in another sense. As Bialostosky points out, aside from intruding into Simon's world, he also intrudes into "the world of the 'gentle' readers." Instead of gratifying the reader's expectation to have a tale full of events, the poet-narrator tells a "non-tale" and asks him to make his own tale out of it. The narrator is indeed a rude intruder (Bialostosky, *Wordsworth* 268). But, if the narrator breaks in deliberately, the authorial intrusion must serve a purpose. With Wordsworth's concern for the "education" of his reader, it is perhaps not surprising that he comes out from behind and addresses the reader directly. And by demanding that his reader make his own tale instead of listening passively, Wordsworth thinks highly of his reader and places a vital importance on reading. This emphasis on reading, I submit, is related to the poet's experience as a reader before he becomes a narrator of Simon's story.

As a reader of Simon's story, the narrator finds himself confronted with two different texts--one from reports or hearsay, the other from his own observation or internalization. The two texts converge in the incident where he lops off the tangled root for Simon. The disparity between what he sees and what he hears brings confusion and adds complexity to the characterization of the old man. From these discrepant accounts, he expects his reader to find the old huntsman more complicated and fascinating than he appears. Simon, the authentic text, is enigmatic. It is only when he helped--and hurt--the old man with that single blow that he knew Simon firsthand for the first time. Only then did he realize how impotent this one-time huntsman had become and how important the past glories meant for the old man. As reader, the narrator now knows the slight yet essential difference between reading the text firsthand and hearing about it secondhand. The discrepancies then dissolve and the complexities of human life also dawn upon him.

This process of reading/learning prompts the narrator to confront the reader directly. From his own experience as outsider, intruder, and reader, he knows a straightforward story of Simon Lee simply will not do. In order to feel the full impact of the tale, to grasp its meaning, the reader has to be alert and involved. Just as the single blow cuts off Simon's illusory link to the past and shocks the narrator into the complexities of reality, so the unconventional move in the narrator's poetic construction shatters the reader's illusion and shocks him into thinking.

As if to help his gentle reader to re-live his experience and discover the full significance of this incident, the narrator structures the poem with "perspective and the co-presence of alternatives" in order not to impose "on the reader a predigested life-view"; instead, he insists that the reader be a "full partner in the final judgement on the facts set before him" (Danby 196). As the poet narrates, he does not tell the tale chronologically nor straightforwardly, but rather with the past and present, the good aspects and bad about Simon all merged and intertwined, one undercutting or superimposing on another. The contradictory statements in the entangled tale present the poet-narrator's mixed feelings and conflicting views towards the old man. Even the authorial intrusion, which manifests the narrator's role as a poet, serves a dual purpose, awakening the reader to life's intricacies and, furthermore, calling on the reader to participate in tale-making. The reader, disturbed and gently shocked by the paradoxical and unexpected statements and turns of events, is likely to sink in restless thought and make a tale/tail out of "Simon Lee" and, like its narrator-poet, writes his own writerly text.

## V

Earlier I referred to Wordsworth's complaint about the lack of memorable characters in Burger's ballads. In this poem, Simon emerges as a complex character. The poet-narrator's stand is that of a "*Spectator ab extra*"—one who has "feeling for, but never with, their characters" (Coleridge, *Table Talk*, July 21, 1832; Feb. 16, 1833; qtd. in Lindenberger 206). Although he feels sorry for the impotent old man and is saddened by his tears and profuse gratitude, what triggers him to write that general comment on man's paradoxical nature is his own unwitting and inconsiderate killing with kindness. Thus, alongside Simon Lee, the character of Wordsworth also looms large. The self-conscious narrator deliberately weaves divergent strands into the texture of a "simple" tale; by appearing naive and plain, he subtly manipulates his reader's response and communicates to him "delicate or minute feelings." Therein lies Wordsworth's strength as poet and his contribution to ballad-writing.

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