Wordsworthian Songcatching in America

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For the handsome two-volume edition of his collected *Poems* that appeared in 1815, William Wordsworth wrote a preface and an "essay, supplementary to the preface" which, taken together, constitute the last major statement of his literary principles.(1)Much of what Wordsworth wrote in these essays echoes or extends what he called the "systematic defence" of his poetic theory and practice he first propounded about a decade and a half earlier in the preface to *Lyrical Ballads*. But in the 1815 supplementary essay the poet goes into detail about a subject he treated only sketchily in the earlier preface: identifying his poetic precursors and cherished influences by name. In light of the poetic project Wordsworth laid out in the preface to *Lyrical Ballads*to depict "situations from common life . . . in a selection of language really used by men" (*Works*, 791), we would expect him to have something laudatory to say about one of the 18th century's most popular collections of English common-language poems, Thomas Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry.* And Wordsworth fulfills this expectation, saying "I do not think that there is an able writer in verse of the present day who would not be proud to acknowledge his obligations to the *Reliques"* (Gill, 656). But he doesn't stop there. To drive his point home, Wordsworth contrasts the authenticity and dignity of the *Reliques* with another celebrated 18th-century example of a reputedly ancient and native-grown poetic tradition, James Macpherson's *Ossian*poems. Percy's *Reliques*, Wordsworth writes, reflect "true simplicity and genuine pathos" (Gill, 654). But Macpherson's purported "translations" of the epic songs of a third-century Celtic bard named Ossian, in Wordsworth's view, amount to nothing but unnatural forgeries, as "audacious as [they are] worthless" (Gill, 656).

Nearly two centuries later, Wordsworth's preference for Percy over Macpherson seems easy enough to explain: faced with a choice between genuine and manufactured folk traditions, Wordsworth, a common-language poet dedicated to tracing in his verses "the primary laws of our nature" and the "essential passions of the heart," gravitated toward authentic, and away from artificial primitives. The choice that Wordsworth made, coupled with his success in creating the taste by which his poems were to be enjoyed, spelled the end of the brief 18th-century vogue of foisting on the public bogus "found" epics. After *Ossian* and the specious "Rowley" poems of Macpherson's imitator Thomas Chatterton were exposed as frauds(2), Wordsworth suggests, we won't be fooled again, both because we've gotten more

skilled at spotting forgeries, and because there’s little need for manufactured primeval grandeur when so many spontaneous expressions of essential human nature lie ready to hand, waiting to be collected and distilled from the ballads and folk songs with which “humble and rustic life” abounds.

By opposing Percy and Macpherson, Wordsworth showed that the primitivist strain in English romanticism might have gone in two very different directions. It could have followed Macpherson’s lead in recapturing the primal through style and rhetoric–combine the names of actual places with a few made-up ones, throw in a few 18th-century archaisms, and tie it all together with inverted, Homeric-sounding syntax, as in this, the opening of a poem called “Oina-Morul” from *Ossian*:

As flies the inconstant sun over Larmon’s grassy hill so pass the tales of old along my soul by night! When bards are removed to their place, when harps are hung in Selma’s hall, then comes a voice to Ossian, and awakes his soul! It is the voice of years that are gone! they roll before me with all their deeds! I seize the tales as they pass, and pour them forth in song.

Or English Romanticism could have followed Percy in evoking the primal through the suggestiveness and understated eloquence of the traditional ballad, as in the stanza from “Babes in the Wood” that Wordsworth reproduced in the 1800 preface to *Lyrical Ballads* to illustrate the power of common-language verse:

These pretty Babes with hand in hand
Went wandering up and down;
But never more they saw the Man
Approaching from the town.

For all the bardism that talented poets like Blake and Shelley contributed to English romanticism, there’s the fine counterbalance of Wordsworth’s demonstration, both in his critical writings and in his poetry, of the profundity lying beneath the uncluttered surfaces of the naïve arts. To the long list of Wordsworth’s groundbreaking poetic pronouncements and accomplishments, we need to add one more item. In addition to persuading English-language poets who came after him to think of poetry as the “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” and to eschew the floridity of “poetic diction,” Wordsworth also encouraged us to trust our love for the simple rhymes and lyrics on which we cut our aesthetic teeth, and to view popular culture not as the vulgar alternative to high literary culture, but as a deep well of living human truth from which the finest and most philosophically serious poetry could draw “renovating virtue.” Under Wordsworth’s influence, the poet was not only “a man speaking to men,” but also a*songcatcher*. And what is a songcatcher? For a start, a songcatcher is animated by an entirely different attitude toward the old stories than Ossian has, who in the final sentence of the passage above portrays himself as cut from the warrior mold he celebrates: he’s a poet who lies in wait,

seizes the heroic tales as they pass, presumably knocking them on the head before stealing their glory and arrogating it to himself as he sings "his" songs. A songcatcher, by contrast, admires and respects the land and the stories it holds, and loves the people whose everyday lives are passed under nature's watchful care. Part rural poet, part itinerant folklorist, and part amateur anthropologist, the songcatcher is a peripatetic gatherer and interpreter of the rawest data of humanity's ongoing project of self-understanding.

2

The influence that traditional balladry had on Wordsworth's writings is well understood.(3) Less extensively covered, though, is the influence that Wordsworth had on how subsequent artists and scholars viewed traditional balladry. This essay will chart that influence, particularly with regards to how the bridge that Wordsworth built between folk and high literary culture in both his critical writings and his poetry changed the way that the traditional arts were viewed in the 19th and 20th centuries. The story of Wordsworth's songcatching and the subsequent history of Wordsworthian songcatching in America will point to the pivotal role that this nineteenth-century poet played in shaping the contours of contemporary life, particularly in the United States, where a number of geographical, demographic, and cultural factors have combined to spread his influence way beyond poetry and even literature, and into American culture at large.

This journey spans more than two centuries and crosses the Atlantic at least a couple of times, but it starts in Britain with the humble ballad. And what is a ballad? Simply stated, a ballad is a song that tells a story–or, it's a story told in song. In the early years of the last century, George Lyman Kittredge identified five characteristics that distinguish the ballad from other literary forms: a ballad is "a short narrative poem, adapted for singing, simple in plot and metrical structure, divided into stanzas, and characterized by complete impersonality so far as the author or singer is concerned" (Child, xi). Poets of Wordsworth's day seeking to re-create the feel of traditional balladry frequently employed the ballad stanza: alternating four beat and three beat lines rhyming ab ab, as in this, the opening of Percy's version of "Barbara Allen's Cruelty":

In Scarlet towne, where I was borne,
There was a fair made dwellin,
Made every youth crye, wel-awaye!
Her name was Barbara Allen
(Wordsworth and Coleridge, 246)

Of Kittredge's five characteristics of ballads, the last–the "impersonality" of the author or singer–is the one that really distinguishes the ballad from other types of poetry. In many respects, this requirement is counterintuitive, for it contradicts the commonly-held notion that lyric arises within and represents a specific and identifiable individual consciousness.

Ballads, by contrast, are verses that have become detached from whoever originally composed them, and therefore have passed into collective ownership. Though ballads originated in a single mind–every ballad, presumably, had a first singer–through time they become the common property of successive generations, who might alter them with each iteration, but also keep them alive, either as old songs passed from parent to child, or as cheap printed broadsides, sold for a half penny in the streets of cities large and small.(4)

Broadside ballads can be very old, since the broadside ballad industry emerged simultaneously with the invention of the printing press. And though an old, anonymous story or song could go from a broadside into the oral folk tradition, only to be collected later and printed again, more often the process moved in the opposite direction, making broadsides–at least potentially–a source of ethnographic data. While a handful of ballad anthologies were published in England prior to 1760(5), the literary tastemakers of the Restoration and 18th century tended to view a love for ballads as a quaint holdover of one's childhood tastes, or, at best, a gentleman's hobby, indulged privately. The diarist Samuel Pepys had a collection of some 1700 broadside ballads, and in a diary entry of January 2, 1666, wrote of his "perfect pleasure" in hearing an actress sing "her little Scotch song of Barbary Ellen" (quoted in Wilentz, 9). In*Spectator* 85, Joseph Addison, risking the scorn of his Augustan Age readers, praised "the old Ballad of the *Two Children of the Wood*" as "a plain simple Copy of Nature, destitute of the Helps and Ornaments of Art" (Addison). What is recognized today as the English ballad revival that reached into Wordsworth's lifetime begins in 1760, when Percy's *Reliques* and Macpherson's *Fragments of Ancient Poetry,* the first volume of the Ossian poems, both appeared. The wide popularity of both books spawned a literary fad that picked up speed as Wordsworth matured from boy to man. In 1769, David Herd's *The Ancient and Modern Scots Songs, Heroic Ballads, etc.* appeared; a second edition, with the slightly altered title of *Ancient and Modern Scottish Songs*, came out in 1776. We know that sometime before 1800 Wordsworth had seen this collection, because he copied four verses of a Herd ballad titled *The Cruel Mother* into his commonplace book, verses which seem to have influenced *The Thorn,* a gloomy ballad of insanity and child murder that appeared in *Lyrical Ballads*. Joseph Ritson brought out several anthologies of songs and ballads in the 1780s, and by the beginning of the all-important decade of the 1790s, ballad collecting and imitating emerged as something approaching a full-blown craze. Joanna Baillie's *Poems; Wherein It Is Attempted to Describe Certain Views of Nature* appeared in 1790; it featured "The Storm-Beat Maid," with its Percyesque subtitle, "Somewhat after the style of our old English Ballads" (Wordsworth and Coleridge, 248). And the ballad fad was by no means limited to Britain: in 1796, William Taylor, Wordsworth's teacher at Hawkshead Grammar School, published a translation of Gottfried Burger's *Lenora*, originally written in German but based on the Percy ballad "Sweet William's Ghost." Walter Scott also translated *Lenora*for magazine publication in 1796, and later identified this as the work that made him want to become a poet.

The old ballads being resurrected and imitated in the 1790s held for Wordsworth the

nostalgic appeal carried by all songs of childhood. But there was an added attraction: under the influence of both Percy and McPherson, British ballad collection around the turn of the century focused on the border counties of northern England and southern Scotland, the cherished haunts of Wordsworth's native district. One reason for this was that Percy saw the relatively uncivilized state of life on the border as the source of the traditional ballads' emotional intensity and authenticity. Though, wrote Percy in his "Essay on the Ancient Minstrels," "the old Minstrel-ballads. . . are extremely incorrect, and run into the utmost licence of metre," they also display "romantic wildness, and. . .[the] true spirit of chivalry." The long-disputed border between the two kingdoms, Percy goes on to say, has proved an excellent impetus for imaginative flight and aid to poetic composition:

There is scarce an old historical song or Ballad wherein a Minstrel or Harper appears, but he is characterized by way of eminence to have been "of the North Countreye": and indeed the prevalence of the Northern dialect in such compositions, shews that this representation is real. On the other hand the scene of the finest Scottish Ballads is laid in the South of Scotland; which should have been particularly the nursery of Scottish Minstrels. In the old song of Maggy Lawder, a Piper is asked, by way of distinction, Come ye frae the Border?– The Martial spirit constantly kept up and exercised near the frontier of the two kingdoms, as it furnished continual subjects for their Songs, so it inspired the inhabitants of the adjacent counties on both sides with the powers of poetry. Besides, as our Southern Metropolis must have ever been the scene of novelty and refinement, the northern countries, as being most distant, would preserve their ancient manners longest, and of course the old poetry, in which those manners are peculiarly described (qtd. in Stewart, 140).

3

It would be difficult to overstate how powerfully Percy's equation of the harshness and violence of life on the northern border with poetic genuineness influenced first-generation English Romantics. It contributed greatly to the appeal of Robert Burns, whose Scottish dialect poetry evoked the romantic wildness of northern life for London literati in the 1780s and 90s. Walter Scott prefaced *The Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border,* his 1802 collection of traditional ballads and original poetic compositions on balladic themes, with a fifty-page chronicle of the intrigues, feuds, vendettas, plundering raids, and outbursts of remorseless savagery on both sides of the border, stretching from the Roman occupation to the last Jacobite rebellion of Bonnie Prince Charlie in 1745. For Percy and his intellectual and poetic progeny, life lived close to the land–and, especially, life lived close to the land *on the border*–laid human nature bare, amplifying alike humankind's innate goodness and its depravity.

In his own way, Wordsworth subscribed to this view, though his poems tended to emphasize the goodness, seeing selfishness and violence as moral aberrations capable of being ameliorated, as he put it in the subtitle of Book 8 of the *Prelude,* by the love of nature. The

common-language poetry project he first outlined in the 1800 preface to*Lyrical Ballads* rests, however, on a Percyesque equation of ancient or traditional manners with essential human nature. Wordsworth's poems depict situations from "low and rustic life," he tells his readers, because in these circumstances "the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language." But beneath his assertions in the preface that the poet is a "rock of defence of human nature" (Gill 606) and that the language of poetry should closely resemble "that of life and nature" (Gill 612) do more than merely justify Wordsworth's decision to adopt an unadorned style in his poems. The preface also makes the most powerful argument that the English-speaking world had yet seen for the deep psychological and philosophical significance of the naïve arts, especially traditional balladry, the naïve art form closest to Wordsworth's heart since childhood. As I've mentioned, he used four lines from the Percy ballad of "the *Babes* in the wood" in the 1800 preface to illustrate the intrinsic elegance and dignity of common-language poetry. The important role played by balladry in the development of Wordsworth's ideas about poetry was registered in other ways as well. In his Alfoxden notebook of 1797, Wordsworth wrote of his love for the "Scotch songs. . .Scotch poetry, old Ballads & old tales" he had known as a boy, and in 1808 he told Francis Wrangham that he had once thought of circulating some "songs, poems, and little histories" as cheap street ballads, printed on halfpenny sheets (Parrish 85).

Wordsworth's most extensive explanation of how balladry influenced his poetry appeared in the "Essay, Supplementary to the Preface" he wrote as a sort of epilogue to volume two of his collected poems of 1815. After naming Spenser, Shakespeare and Milton as his major influences from the neo-classical era (and dismissing Pope and Dryden), Wordsworth identified James Thomson and Percy as his most important and most immediate poetic influences. Thomson's *The Seasons,* Wordsworth wrote, was "a work of inspiration" (Gill, 650); and the ballads Percy "collected, new-modelled, and in many instances (if such a contradiction in terms may be used) composed," had "absolutely redeemed" English poetry (Gill, 653). Wordsworth's kind words for Percy bracket his scornful–and much longer–disquisition on Macpherson and the Ossianic phenomenon, which begins with a sarcastic apostrophe: "All hail Macpherson! Hail to thee, Sire of Ossian! The phantom was begotten by the snug embrace of an impudent Highlander upon a cloud of tradition–it traveled southward where it was greeted with acclamation, and the thin Consistence took its course through Europe, upon the breath of popular applause" (Gill, 654). But while England and the continent rejoiced in Macpherson's apparent discovery both of a previously unknown epic and a native-grown Homer to sing that epic, Wordsworth wasn't buying it:

Having had the good fortune to be born and reared in a mountainous Country, from my very childhood I have felt the falsehood that pervades the volumes imposed upon the World under the name of Ossian. From what I saw with my own eyes, I knew that the imagery was spurious. In nature every thing is distinct, yet nothing defined into absolute independent singleness. In Macpherson's work it is exactly the reverse; every thing (that is not stolen) is

in this manner defined, insulated, dislocated, deadened–yet nothing distinct. It will always be so when words are substituted for things (Gill, 655).(6)

This is a marvelously dense extract from the essay, and manages to express in only five sentences many of the essential elements of Wordsworth's worldview–from it one can abstract his theories of cognitive process, the way that nature imprints itself upon human consciousness, and how poetic language reflects reality. It also reveals what Wordsworth saw as the basis of traditional balladry's lasting value. If Macpherson is the opposite of Percy, and in *Ossian* everything is "insulated, dislocated, [and] deadened," it follows that in Percy's ballads things are immediate, connected, and vivid. Can there be a better example of a spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling than an ancient ballad, conceived in the throes of an elemental passion, and carried into the present by its power to confront us with timeless human truth?

But for all Wordsworth did to make the case for the aesthetic and philosophic validity of balladry, he generally did not–unlike some of his contemporaries–write imitations or re-enactments of ballads, as Coleridge had in "Rime of the Ancient Mariner," "The Three Graves," and the "Ballad of the Dark Ladie." Though Wordsworth employed the clippity-clop ballad meter in many of the lyrics composed between 1797 and 1804, including some of the Lucy poems, "Expostulation and Reply, "Tables Turned," "We Are Seven," and "Anecdote for Fathers," the element of traditional balladry that found its way most frequently into his verse was the melancholic indeterminacy of the stories the ballads told. Like myths, ballads start out as orally transmitted records of some actual (usually violent) event, acquiring the features that enable them to serve as exculpatory or scapegoating narratives as they pass from hand to hand. A ballad is a recital of some tragedy, societal or domestic, in which one or more people suffered. Some ballads–especially those that spring from public catastrophes, like train wrecks, ship wrecks, and gruesome multiple murders–can go on at great length in detailing this suffering, with each new singer adding a stanza or two to a song about the wreck of the old '97 or the loss of the *Titanic*. Ballads about domestic murders, betrayals, and loss, though, tend to be shorter, and sometimes elide most of their identifying details in order to heighten their poignancy, as in "Bonny George Campbell," an old Scottish ballad as it was performed by North Carolina native Bascom Lamar Lunsford in 1949:

4

High upon highlands, low upon Tay,
Bonny George Campbell rode out one day.
All saddled, all bridled, and booted rode he
And home came the saddle, but never came he.
My barn is to build, my baby's unborn,
My Bonny George Campbell will never return.

Well, high upon highlands, low upon Tay,
Bonny George Campbell rode out one day.
All saddled, all bridled, and booted rode he,
But home came the saddle and never came he.
Home came the saddle all bloody to see
And home came the good horse, but never came he.(7)

The earliest printed version of “Bonny George Campbell” didn’t appear until after Wordsworth published *Lyrical Ballads*, so we can’t know for certain whether he was influenced by this specific ballad. It’s pretty typical, though, of the Scottish border ballads with which Wordsworth grew up in its concentration on the suffering of those left behind, with their sorrows figured by the humble quotidian tasks of rural life. A ballad like this raises more questions than it answers: who is Bonny George Campbell, and what happened to him? Is he alive or dead? What other hopes of the unidentified speaker have been dashed by his disappearance? The same sorts of questions arise from Wordsworth’s “Lucy” poems, such as “She Dwelt Among the Untrodden Ways” and “A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal”:

She dwelt among the untrodden ways
Beside the springs of Dove,
A Maid whom there were none to praise
And very few to love:
A violet by a mossy stone
Half hidden from the eye!
–Fair as a star, when only one
Is shining in the sky.
She lived unknown, and few could know
When Lucy ceased to be;
But she is in her grave, and, oh,
The difference to me!(*Works*, ed Sheats, 112)

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.(*Works*, ed Sheats, 111)

Poems like this evoke the speaker’s peculiarly mingled feelings of grief and awe by leaving out the narrative details one would expect to encounter in conventional elegies and laments. Who is Lucy? Why did she die? What does it mean when the speaker of “She Dwelt Among the Untrodden Ways” focuses his attention in the middle stanza on a “violet by a mossy stone / Half hidden from the eye?” And in “A Slumber,” the pronoun “she” appears in both stanzas–but with no clear antecedent. Is the antecedent the “spirit,” or the unnamed female who’s rolling around with rocks and stones and trees? Much of the power of these two justly admired lyrics may be traced to the way that they, like “Bonny George Campbell,” employ a gestural aesthetics that produces a poignancy all the more powerful for its having been muted. They point at, but do not dare to name, their originating events. Like the old ballads, the Lucy poems appear to have come down to the present from a long time ago, and in the process of that transmission have been stripped of all but their most essential elements.

What they*don't* say invites readers to supply from their own store of feelings something approaching the emotional impact of the ballads' precipitating events.

This spare and delicate gestural style was one of Wordsworth's most important legacies to the poets who came after him. Standing midway between the antiquarian ballad collectors of the middle 18th century and the common-language poets (Browning, Tennyson, Whitman, et. al.) of the middle of the 19th century, Wordsworth both benefited from and perpetuated the ballad revival. But by the time of Wordsworth's death in 1850 the old northern British ballads had all been collected from the Scottish highlanders and dalesmen of England's border counties, and were being continuously recycled into historical romances, nursery rhymes and tales, and expendable rustic poetry by Sir Walter Scott, James Hogg, Robert Southey, and others. By 1825 or so, there was little untouched folk culture to be found, even in the remotest corners of Britain. Much of that culture had been overrun by industrialization (particularly in the form of lead and coal mining) or dispersed by enclosure of pasturelands. In the 19thcentury, searchers for Percy's genuine "North Countreye" singers began to look westward across the Atlantic, where a treasure trove of unspoiled British folk culture flourished after one of the largest and rapidest mass migrations in recorded history: the movement of a quarter- to a half-million people from the border regions of England, Scotland, and Northern Ireland to the backcountry of the United States between 1717 and 1775.

5

All American schoolchildren know that the first successful British colony in North America was founded by the Puritan Pilgrims, who came from East Anglia to Massachusetts in 1620. The next wave of British immigration brought "distressed cavaliers" (and their indentured servants) from the losing side of the English Civil War to the tidewater and Chesapeake Bay regions of what is today Virginia, Delaware, and Maryland. The third wave brought societies of "Friends," religious dissenters of various sects–Quakers, Shakers, Mennonites, Anabaptists–from England's north midlands to settle in New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and the Delaware River Valley. Almost all of these first three waves were completed by about 1715, and altogether brought about 90,000 British people to North America. But this total amounted to less than half of even the most conservative estimate of the number of Anglo-Scots-Irish immigrants who arrived in the 18th century.

Like most immigrants to the new world, the British borderers sought space, freedom from governmental regulation of their traditional ways of life, and economic opportunity. In North America, they settled in the landscape that most closely resembled that which they had left: the mountainous trans-Appalachian region that runs from the middle of Georgia in a roughly northeasterly direction across western South and North Carolina, western Virginia, and eastern Tennessee and Kentucky, eventually merging with the Alleghany Mountains in Pennsylvania. By the end of the 18th century, there were Anglo-Scots-Irish settlements

scattered throughout what is today the American south–an area roughly the size of Western Europe, and today the most populous of the United States Census Bureau's four national regions, with a current population of about 106 million, more than a third of the total population of the U.S.

Contemporary American southern culture still bears many signs of its having originated in the British borderlands. Many of the speech ways and regionalisms of the American south–like using the verb "reckon" as "to think" or "to consider"–can be traced to northern English dialects. The best evidence of the northern British provenance of southern American culture, though, comes from Appalachian place names. After he sings "Bonny George Campbell," Bascom Lamar Lunsford says that the American title of the fiddle tune derived from "Bonny George Campbell" is "Cumberland Gap." Cumberland was far and away the favorite place name bestowed by the British borderers on their new world homes. There are Cumberland Mountains in eastern Tennessee, a Cumberland Knob in North Carolina, the Cumberland river, which rises on the western slopes of the Appalachians in North Carolina, and waters the fertile Bluegrass region of southern Kentucky and northern Tennessee, and the Cumberland Gap, a mountain pass that connects the American backcountry with the southern port cities of Savannah, Georgia and Charleston, South Carolina. There are Cumberland counties in Kentucky, North Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and southern Pennsylvania, and too many towns and cities named Cumberland, both in the United States and in eastern Canada, to list.

The mountainous topography of the southern backcountry, combined with the clannish tendencies the borderers brought from their homelands, kept the Appalachians pretty isolated well into the 20th century. Electricity and indoor plumbing didn't come to much of the region until the late 1930s. While this isolation kept Appalachia a couple of generations behind urban America in economic development, it also protected the old British folksongs, ballads, and stories the borderers brought with them to the new world from being diluted or altered by encounters with other folk traditions. This meant that well into the 20th-century, one could still find in the *cricks* and *hollers* of the Southern mountains pristine examples of northern British ballads as they had sung in the old world two or three centuries ago.

The first and most influential Wordsworthian songcatcher in America was Harvard English professor Francis James Child (1825-1896). Two factors combined to interest Child in traditional balladry: the first was his exposure, at Berlin and Göttingen in the late 1840s, to Germanic philology's effort to transform the "romantic dilettantism" of literary criticism into something approaching a "well-organized and strenuous scientific discipline" (Child, vol. I, p. xxv). The second factor arose from his work as general editor of a series of volumes titled the "British Poets," published in Boston between the late 1840s and the 1870s. In the course of overseeing the publication of this series (which eventually ran to more than 150 volumes), Child repeatedly ran across examples of British balladry, and resolved in the late 1850s to edit a definitive collection of all extant variants of English and Scottish ballads. This

monumental task occupied Child for the rest of his life, and culminated in the publication of the *English and Scottish Popular Ballads* in five volumes between 1882 and 1898.

The Child canon consists of more than 5000 variants of 305 ballads. Variants were arranged chronologically, earliest to latest, and reproduced exactly as they appeared in their independent sources. This degree of meticulousness, Child hoped, would introduce much-needed scientific precision into ballad study, and would correct the misleading editorial practices of earlier collectors like Percy and Scott, who sometimes omitted a ballad's rustic indecencies or furnished incomplete ballads with their own "improvements." Child's editorial apparatus in *English and Scottish Popular Ballads* was designed to eliminate opportunities for such silent emendations. As a result, Child's collection remains an enormously useful research tool, and contemporary ballad scholarship still refers to ballads and their variants with Child's numbers.

At first glance, it might seem that nothing could be farther from Wordsworth's love of traditional balladry's delicate fragmentariness than Child's patently Victorian attempt to catalogue exhaustively the products of an everyday activity carried on over several millennia. In at least one respect, though, Child was a Wordsworthian songcatcher. Child shared with Wordsworth an all-important anthropological assumption about traditional balladry: the older and more rural the ballad, the more truly the ballad is presumed to reveal the essential characteristics of humanity. Ironically, this is shown by the strange fate suffered in *English and Scottish Popular Ballads* of the "Babes in the Wood," the ballad that Wordsworth that quoted so lovingly in the preface to *Lyrical Ballads.* Percy's version of "The Babes in the Wood" appeared in volume III of Child's first collection of ballads that appeared in 8 volumes in 1857-58. During the process of expanding these volumes for the definitive edition, however, Child grew increasingly committed to excluding from the collection any ballads that did not show evidence of having circulated orally before being transcribed either by collectors or broadside printers. After he was granted access to Percy's manuscripts in the late 1860s, Child discovered that Percy's version appeared to have been taken verbatim from a seventeenth-century black-letter broadside. Calling "Babes in the Wood" "popular" rather than "genuine," Child omitted the ballad from the definitive collection–despite the fact that the title of his life's work was *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*. Like Wordsworth, who in the 1815 "Essay, Supplementary to the Preface" had excoriated Macpherson and equated poetic popularity with sensationalism, extravagance, and superficiality, Child deeply distrusted the ability of manufactured primitivism to represent essential human nature.

6

Curious omissions like this notwithstanding, Child's collection carried Wordsworthian songcatching into the next century, and sent scores of professors, amateur musicologists, and nostalgic searchers for the beloved songs of their childhoods into the cricks and hollers

of Appalachia, hoping to find a previously uncollected variant of an old ballad. The last of the great transatlantic Wordsworthian songcatchers was Cecil Sharp, who was renowned in England for having revived interest in traditional Morris dancing around the turn of the 20th century. Sharp spent nine weeks of the summers of 1915 and 1916 walking through Appalachia collecting old British folk songs, which he published in *English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians* (1917). After Sharp, though, Wordsworthian songcatching in America was increasingly pursued by the mountain folk themselves, who by the late 1920s had a new, economic incentive for learning and preserving the old ballads. Thanks to gradually rising standards of living in America's rural areas, more country folk had radios and phonographs, which created the need for recordings of the ballads and social music that had been sung and played on cabin porches and at Saturday night barn dances for generations. In August of 1927, an enterprising record executive from New York named Ralph Peer opened the last chapter of the story of Wordsworthian songcatching in America. Peer placed an advertisement in the Bristol, Tennessee *News Bulletin* inviting musicians who could perform the "songs of the mountains" to audition for a contract with Victor records. The ad found its way to Maces Springs, Virginia–only 26 miles from Bristol as the crow flies, but an all-day journey in those days, owing to the primitive condition of the roads–where Alvin Pleasant Carter, his wife Sara, and their sister-in-law Maybelle Carter decided to take up Peer's offer. Calling themselves the Carter Family, the trio recorded three songs for Peer, who released two of them, "The Storms are On the Ocean" and "Single Girl, Married Girl" in early 1928. The record started selling all over the south, and the American country music industry was born, with the Carters as its first family. Between 1928 and 1930, the Carters sold 700,000 records.

Through A. P. Carter, Wordsworthian songcatching passed from professor-antiquarians like Percy, Child, and Sharp back into the hands of people who, like Burns, Wordsworth, and Scott, lived close to a land still brimming with vital folk traditions. During his lifetime A. P. Carter would claim credit for having composed some 300 songs recorded by the Carter Family, including many–like "Will the Circle Be Unbroken," "Keep on the Sunny Side," and "Wildwood Flower"–that have become standards of American folk and country music. But A. P. created out of whole cloth only a handful of songs; like Burns and Scott, he was first and foremost a collector, who adapted everything he found–from genuine Anglo-Scots-Irish ballads that had come over with the borderers to maudlin Victorian parlor-piano songs–to the raw, stripped-to-the-bone Carter Family style, as in, "Single Girl, Married Girl," their first hit record:

Single girl, single girl
She goes to the store and buys
Oh, she goes to the store and buys
Married girl, married girl
She rocks the cradle and cries
Oh, rocks the cradle and cries

Single girl, single girl
She's going where she please
Oh, she's going where she please
Married girl, married girl
Baby on her knee
Oh, baby on her knee.(8)

A. P. Carter said that he learned this song from his mother and taught it to his wife Sara, who sings it on this recording, accompanied by herself on a percussive autoharp, and with Maybelle on guitar, playing the melody on the base strings in between strummed chords(9) (Zwonitzer 25). Sara could have heard "Single Girl, Married Girl," though, from her mother, grandmother, or great-grandmother. No specific old-world source for this song has been identified; but it belongs to a class of Anglo-Scots-Irish ballad, the woman's lament, of which there are several examples in Child's ballads, such as number 79, "The Wife of Usher's Well," or 295, "The Brown Girl." For our purposes, though, less important than the song's provenance is the spare way it evokes the young wife's realization that marriage has irrevocably ended her childhood, even while she still calls herself a girl. The most poignant image of the brutal finality of her transformation from child to adult is the song's second stanza, in which the teenaged girl "rocks the cradle and cries," comforting the baby, but unable to comfort herself. Like Wordsworth's "Lucy" poems and "Bonny George Campbell," "Single Girl, Married Girl" depicts a welter of commingled emotions–self-pity, regret, grief, anger, frustration–as economically as possible, with the same gestural aesthetics that structures both the old Scottish ballad and Wordsworth's balladic lyrics. It's as if the poet posits an inverse proportion between the number of words and the depth of the feelings: the fewer words, the more profound the emotion. Or, to put it in another way, the fewer words, the more universal the feeling, since the feelings can therefore be attributed less to the accumulated (and conventional) meanings of the words and more to something that pre-exists language. In Wordsworthian romanticism–and Wordsworthian romanticism is the defining romanticism of the English-speaking world–gestures come before concepts and names. This is what Wordsworth is talking about when he criticizes Macpherson in the 1815 preface for substituting words for things in the Ossian poems. Words constitute one of the most important mediums for expressing and evoking feelings; but words are *not*the feelings they evoke. When words are fetishized as things, they become obstacles, rather than avenues, to the feelings that remain constant despite differences in language, culture, time, or whether the Atlantic ocean is to the west or to the east of your home.

There were, of course, some obvious and significant differences between these two songcatchers, Wordsworth and A. P. Carter. Though Wordsworth lived almost all of his long life in the country, he still had a university education, and he lived, and comported himself, as an English gentleman. A. P. Carter had, at most, three years of formal schooling; and though the financial success of the Carter Family would have enabled him to live grandly in a southern metropolis like Nashville or Atlanta, he never left what he called his "Clinch Mountain home" in Maces Springs, Virginia. But though Carter couldn't have *been* Wordsworth, A. P. could have been created *by* Wordsworth: in *The Excursion*, the long narrative poem of 1814 that gave Wordsworth a broad English readership, the narrator is a man like A. P. Carter, a "Pedlar" who walks the hills and valleys selling humble rustic goods as means of supporting himself while he pursued his avocation of collecting stories and lore that illustrate humanity's essential characteristics. Before he made his fortune in music, A. P. Carter was an itinerant peddler, selling fruit trees, seeds, and simple farm implements to

his neighbors in the mountains of western Virginia. Both were restless, peripatetic poets. Wordsworth usually composed his verses while walking; indeed, a path he built for this very purpose on the steep hillside behind Dove Cottage in Grasmere, England, can still be seen today. A. P. Carter's daughter Janette remembers her father as a restless, thoughtful man, always walking "up and down the railroad tracks, his hands behind his back" as he composed or arranged his songs (Carter 32).

7

And in addition to sharing these temperamental similarities, both created the taste by which they were to be enjoyed–Wordsworth as the poet of common language and ordinary life, Carter as the creator of the raw, elemental, and genuine style of popular music. In the course of creating these new tastes, both expanded the canons of the genres in which they worked, Wordsworth by bringing the simple dignity of folk songs and ballads into literary poetry, Carter by demonstrating the universalizing appeal of spare orchestration and heartfelt, unadorned performance. Both served as tutelary figures and inspirations for those who came after them. As Percy and Burns were to Wordsworth, Wordsworth was to later British and American poets–a solid ground from which Matthew Arnold and Walt Whitman could embark on their own explorations of humanity's essential characteristics. A. P. Carter has played that same role for several generations of songwriter-poets, from Woody Guthrie to Joan Baez and Bob Dylan. Carter's songs serve as a seemingly inexhaustible well of authentic human truth, capable of restoring lost vigor to artistic forms that have been enervated by over-cultivation. When the overuse of conventions makes art grow stale, go back to the roots, and reinvigorate your art with raw folk energy. This is the logic of Romantic revivalism, for it tells us that when the way forward grows hazy or dim, we can always go back to our roots, as Wordsworth, casting about in Book I of *The Prelude* to find an original theme for his modern epic, "some work / of glory . . . forthwith to be begun" (79-80), goes back to his own roots, his childhood, and finds an epic waiting there for him.

After Romanticism, artistic culture can go in two directions: it can strive for ever-greater degrees of originality, which usually incorporate the "transgressive" acts so beloved by pop culture scholars in academia today; or it can seek roots, by scraping away the accretions of culture and civilization to reveal a pristine, and therefore true, originary scene. Both directions have their pitfalls: transgressors risk invoking disgust and scorn in their spectators; root-seekers risk ridicule if what they present as the simply authentic is received as mere corniness. There's an old joke about country music that reveals how quickly and easily simple truths can morph into hokey conventions. What happens when you play a country song backwards? You get your woman back, you get your pick-up truck back, you get your dog back. . . In their day, the rustic poetry of Burns, Wordsworth, and Scott occasionally aroused the same kind of ridicule. In an 1814 review of *The Excursion,* Francis Jeffrey tartly declared "This will never do!" and went on to task Wordsworth for trying to evince eloquent simplicity "by sprinkling up and down his interminable declamations a few

descriptions of baby-houses, and of old hats with wet brims" (Perkins, 463, 467). In light of this, calling Wordsworth the great-grandfather of country music could be the lowest insult or the highest praise, but I'll leave it to my readers to make that determination on their own. Suffice it to say that for all the ridicule that country music generates in blue-state America, the lives of tens of millions of red-state Americans play out against the background of what Nashville songwriter Harlan Howard identified as the essential ingredients of a country song: three chords and the truth. If it tells us nothing else, the story of Wordsworthian songcatching in America demonstrates that at least two Romanticism's most bracing innovations–the breaking down of the wall separating high and popular culture and the dedication to seeing the timeless truths of humanity wherever they can be found–have been so universally accepted that we've forgotten there was a time when people didn't believe in what David Bromwich has called Wordsworth's "sense of radical humanity" (7). Contrary to what's taught in chronological surveys of English literature, Romanticism wasn't swept under the richly embroidered rug of Victorianism. Romanticism found a permanent home in popular culture, where it continues to shape the contours of everyday life.

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Notes

1. For *Yarrow Revisited, and Other Poems* in 1835, Wordsworth wrote a postscript in which he laid out his views on poverty relief, trade unionism, and the state of English religion. See *Poetical Works*, ed. Sheats, 817-825. (back)

2. Between 1768 and 1769, Thomas Chatterton (1752-1770) published a series of purportedly antique manuscripts written by a 15th-century English monk named Thomas Rowley. The Rowley materials, which included contrived historical chronicles, lyric poems, and dramas, earned Chatterton a brief renown, and he resolved to make a living as a professional writer. But his plans for a literary career foundered on the realities of the London publishing world of the late 1760s, and on August 25, 1770 Chatterton was found dead in a garret, surrounded by scraps of paper and an empty arsenic bottle. Though his death may have been accidental (arsenic was sometimes used to cure gonorrhea), Chatterton served as a powerful symbol of the self-sacrificing artist for later English romantic poets. Coleridge wrote a "Monody on the Death of Chatterton"; Wordsworth called him "the marvelous boy" in "Resolution and Independence"; and Chatterton appears in "Adonais," Shelley's elegy for Keats. It was Keats himself, though, who fell most under the spell of Chatterton's image as an untutored genius: Keats dedicated *Endymion*, the long narrative poem he wrote in 1815-16 as a "trial of my powers," to Chatterton. (back)

3. See Robert Mayo, "The Contemporaneity of *Lyrical Ballads*," *PMLA,* Vol. 69, No. 3 (June, 1954), 486-522; Mary Jacobus, *Tradition and Experiment in* Lyrical Ballads (Oxford, 1976); Nicholas Roe, *Wordsworth and Coleridge: The Radical Years* (Oxford, 1988). For a more focused discussion of the stylistic similarities between Wordsworth's poetry and traditional ballads, see Stephen Parrish, *The Art of the* Lyrical Ballads (Harvard, 1973), especially 121-125 and 173-177, and Paul Sheats, *The Making of Wordsworth's Poetry*(Harvard, 1973), 184-187. For the history and evolution of high-cultural ballad imitations by canonical poets, see Malcolm G. Laws, Jr., *The English Literary Ballad* (Carbondale, 1971). (back)

4. Greil and Marcus (p. 7) reproduce an early 19th-century broadside of “Barbara Allen’s Cruelty.” For the history of broadside ballad publication in England, see Hyder Rollins, “The Black-Letter Broadside Ballad,”*PMLA*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (1919), 258-339. (back)

5. Ambrose Philips’ *A Collection of Old Ballads* came out between 1723 and 1725 and Allen Ramsay’s *The Ever Green* and *The Tea-Table Miscellany* both appeared in 1724. (back)

6. I am grateful to Jonathan Wordsworth for pointing out that Wordsworth was middle-aged when he made this statement, but there is little reason to doubt that as an adolescent, he was as caught up in the Ossianic craze as any of his contemporaries. (back)

7. Lunsford (1882-1973), who called himself “The Minstrel of the Appalachians,” was born and lived in South Turkey Creek, near Leicester, North Carolina. The composer of the hillbilly standard “Old Mountain Dew,” Lunsford also collected Anglo-American ballads, and claimed that he knew more than 3000 folk songs. In 1949, Lunsford spent a month in Washington D.C., recording some 325 songs for the Library of Congress. This text of “Bonny George Campbell” is transcribed from Lunsford’s recording on Smithsonian/Folkways SF 40082 (1996). (back)

8. The Carters recorded “Single Girl, Married Girl” several times between 1928 and 1943. The original Victor recording can be heard on *The Anthology of American Folk Music* , ed. Harry Smith (Smithsonian Folkways 40090 / A 28750, 1997). (back)

9. This was Maybelle Carter’s signature style, and is still known in country music as the “Carter Scratch.” The crisp electric-guitar base notes on Johnny Cash’s recordings of the 1960s–especially in “Folsom Prison Blues,” “I Walk the Line,” and “Orange Blossom Special”–were derived from the Carter Scratch. Cash met Maybelle Carter shortly after breaking into the music business in the 1950s, and in 1968 became her son-in-law when he married Maybelle’s daughter June. (back)