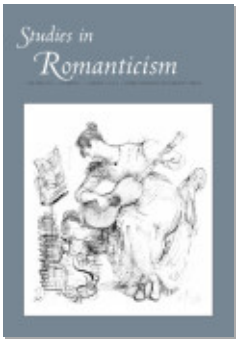
Wordsworth and Reading's Promise

Stacey McDowell



Studies in Romanticism, Volume 60, Number 1, Spring 2021, pp. 57-78 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/srm.2021.0002*

STACEY McDOWELL

Wordsworth and Reading's Promise

In the *Grasmere Journal* entry for March 23, 1802, Dorothy Wordsworth describes a cozy night spent with her brother at Dove Cottage:

> he is now reading Ben Jonson I am going to read German it is about 10 o clock, a quiet night. The fire flutters & the watch ticks I hear nothing else save the Breathings of my Beloved & he now & then pushes his book forward & turns over a leaf.[1]

Dorothy traces a continuity between William's current action and her anticipated one: "he is now reading . . . I am going to read." Her future reading is enfolded within the rhythms that punctuate the present. "The fire flutters & the watch ticks" in time with his breathing and the steady pace of his reading, "& he now & then" turns a page. Another "&" where we might expect "as" suggests continuance more than just simultaneity. Dorothy's slipping from "he is now reading" to "I am going to read" then back to the present o'clock, without conjunction or punctuation, lends a sense of convergence to their actions. Or it might be just a slip of the pen, the off-handedness of journal writing. What marks the difference between togetherness and coincidence, between doing something together and simply happening to do it at the same time?

While Dorothy's "going to read" intention aims to coincide with the "is now reading" of her brother, each sibling will yet remain separately absorbed in his or her own book—Jonson or German respectively. Something peculiar about the shared solitude of reading in company helps to tease out the possibilities and limits of togetherness, which Dorothy's example locates in a sense of presence felt in the rhythms of time. Her journal is full of instances of reading alongside William, sometimes with her sister-in-law, Mary, and sometimes with Coleridge. The collaborative practices of the Wordsworth circle have long-since qualified the image of the solitary poet, and more recent work on reading studies, biography, and friendship has drawn out the frequent companionability of the Wordsworths' reading

1. Dorothy Wordsworth, *The Grasmere and Alfoxden Journals*, ed. Pamela Woof (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2002), 82.

habits, too.[2] Yet William himself rarely describes instances of reading in company. Descriptions of reading in his poems more often invoke an absent reader—someone who for the time being is physically remote or else someone who has died. Imagining what or how that person *would* read *if* he or she were still around to do so keeps up a distant sense of relationship. While Dorothy's scene of reading cherishes the immediacy of presence, it nonetheless offers a suggestive way into thinking about William's absent readers because of the way togetherness in her example is secured by but also contingent on time.

The journal entry was written during the lead-up to William's marriage to Mary Hutchinson and so, as Lucy Newlyn notes, it "memorialized the last months of Dorothy's life alone with William."[3] Commemorating the domestic rhythms of the siblings' past years together—and in a finite time to come—was a way of facing the uncertainty of that coming change. Deidre Lynch has described how reading can lend shape and continuity to routine, as is vividly evoked when she imagines traveling back in time equipped with "an especially sensitive stethoscope" to listen in on Romantic-era readers and hear,

> as if it were a heartbeat, or a kind of bass line, pounding beneath the louder noise of public history, the rhythm that the inhabitants steadily beat out as, turning pages they had turned before, often at the same time of the week or year as before, reciting according to schedule the familiar words they had recited before, they conformed to their bookish routines.[4]

This clocking of time through the rhythms of reading is extended in Christina Lupton's account to include all those as-yet-unread books we tell ourselves we are *going to read* in the time to come. Poised within the present tense of William's turning pages, Dorothy's, "I am going to read," performs at a more immediate and local level something of the reparative shaping of time that Lupton describes: "there's a slowing down, a repetition, a promise, associated with book reading."[5] It is on this idea of promise that I want to focus.

Lupton shows how the familiar longing for more time to read—often claimed as a symptom of busy modern life—can be traced back to the eighteenth century, when an increase in the number of books available to read

2. Studies include Michael Baron, *Language and Relationship in Wordsworth's Writing* (London: Longman, 1995); Lucy Newlyn, *Coleridge, Wordsworth, and the Language of Allusion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986) and *William and Dorothy Wordsworth: All in Each Other* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

3. Newlyn, *William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, 171.

4. Lynch, *Loving Literature: A Cultural History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 154.

5. Lupton, *Reading and the Making of Time in the Eighteenth Century* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018), 22.

coincided with new ways of measuring productivity that put pressure on the time available to read them.[6] But from the pressures and constraints consequently besetting snatched moments of reading, Lupton recovers a sense of the material book as an embodiment of future possibility. The book holds out a utopian promise of leisure time wrested back, plans for self-improvement realized, and peace restored, in a future in which there will finally be time to read.[7] For Dorothy, between her brother's "is now reading" and the answering beat, "I am going to read," there is also a promise of togetherness. The siblings' synchronized rhythms have been, and will continue to be, the journal entry seems to want to imply—at a time when William's coming marriage threatened to bring a disruption. The next day, Dorothy records having received a letter from Mary, before pledging: "I made a vow that we would not leave this County for G[allow] Hill" —that is, she vows not to leave their beloved Lake District for the Hutchinson family home in Yorkshire.[8] The promise made to herself extends to include others and seeks to future-proof relationship.

William, on occasion, similarly casts reading as a promise of future connection. But in his case, this involves the self-conscious anticipation of the moment when his own poems will be read, and will be read as the fulfillment of what would otherwise be a one-sided communication. In the 1800 "Preface" to the *Lyrical Ballads* and the 1815 "Essay, Supplementary to the Preface," poetry represents a kind of contract or pledge between writer and reader, one which brings together the idea of promise in terms of both future potential and a binding, sustaining commitment. The poems written within this period also figure reading in relation to the conditional bonds and rhythms of reciprocity involved in promising and gift-giving. A promise can be said to represent an "overture to the other individual to be party to a certain kind of relationship—an overture that has the character of an offering, or even a gift."[9] Wordsworth imagines forming such bonds with absent readers in *The Prelude* and—my principal example—his poem "Distressful Gift," the elegy to John Wordsworth which confronts the impossibility of John's ever reading the poem intended for him. By looking to another's future reading (even if that reading can never take place), Wordsworth makes an intention to share the basis of his confidence in relationship. If the intention itself at least (the fact of once having had a plan), is not contingent upon that plan's ultimately coming to fruition, then Wordsworth can write in the hope that the relationship

6. See Lupton, *Reading and the Making of Time*, 4–9.

7. See Lupton, *Reading and the Making of Time*, 122–23.

8. Dorothy Wordsworth, *The Grasmere and Alfoxden Journals*, 82.

9. Daniel Friedrich and Nicholas Southwood, "Promises and Trust," in *Promises and Agreements: Philosophical Essays*, ed. Hanoch Sheinman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 279.

will be sustained through the promise of a future reading, a promise held in suspension in the poem.

In the 1800 "Preface," Wordsworth thinks of writing poetry as the undertaking of a contractual obligation to the reader: "By the act of writing in verse an Author makes a formal engagement that he will gratify certain known habits of association."[10] "Formal engagement" nicely captures the dual suggestion of a contract as well as an attentiveness to poetic form. Generic and stylistic conventions inculcate a set of expectations, which any formal innovation necessarily disappoints and so initially comes to look like a broken promise. Outlining the break with stylistic convention he hopes to make with the *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth concedes: "I will not take upon me to determine the exact import of the promise which by the act of writing in verse an Author in the present day makes to his Reader; but I am certain it will appear to many persons that I have not fulfilled the terms of an engagement thus voluntarily contracted."[11] In breaking this promise, though, he hopes to fulfill the promise of future success.

When this failed to materialize—perhaps to the extent he had hoped with the *Lyrical Ballads* and certainly in 1807 with the hostile reception of *Poems, in Two Volumes*—Wordsworth began to look further ahead to posterity. Initial sales of *The Excursion* (1814) were discouraging, and by the time he came to write the 1815 "Essay, Supplementary to the Preface" he was pinning his hopes on the promise of deferred success. Current reactions to his work mattered only in so far as any reading in the present signified a "pledge" or "token" for the time to come:

> The love, the admiration, the indifference, the slight, the aversion, and even the contempt, with which these Poems have been received, knowing, as I do, the source within my own mind, from which they have proceeded, and the labour and pains, which, when labour and pains appeared needful, have been bestowed upon them must all, if I think consistently, be received as pledges and tokens, bearing the same general impression, though widely different in value;—they are all proofs that for the present time I have not laboured in vain; and afford assurances, more or less authentic, that the products of my industry will endure.[12]

It is hard to tell at first whether the pledge refers to the poems themselves or to the reading of them. Necessarily, it works both ways: the fact of the

10. Wordsworth, *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. W. J. B. Owen and J. W. Smyser, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), I:122.
11. Wordsworth, *Prose Works*, I:122.
12. Wordsworth, *Prose Works*, III:80.

poems' having "been received" at all (whatever the verdict) will in turn "be received" as a pledge betokening their future endurance. The assumed indifference to current opinion in favor of hopes for posterity is a familiar posture, as Andrew Bennett has shown.[13] Lucy Newlyn also notes how, in the face of an anonymous mass readership, Wordsworth envisions a more personal, sympathetic reception through the figure of an ideal reader.[14] But as well as a form of defensiveness or way of keeping anxiety at bay, the impulse to look toward a future reading also signals a more positive (or at least a more trusting and less ends-focused) perspective, one which bides time in the suspended potentiality of promise.

Wordsworth's looking ahead to future readings involves, too, a backward-bending view that traces continuity with the past. In the passage above, he traces potentiality back to the time of his poems' composition, with the thought of all the labor and pains that went into them. That thought can then reassuringly be held in mind in the continuous present ("knowing, as I do"). But the strained prose hints at the mental tussle involved, where "if I think consistently" seems to be grasping after a firmer assurance in consistency more generally. While a promise is often thought to relate to the future, the confidence with which it can be made and accepted in the first place looks back to the past by presupposing a certain minimum background of trust.[15] Making a pledge or promise then entails a relaying back and forth in time: securing trust based on the past lends hope that a promise will be kept in the future. Imagining a future reading not only reveals Wordsworth's concern with his own reception, but also becomes a way of honoring the past.

As part of *The Prelude*'s project of recollection, Wordsworth traces his earliest enjoyment of poetry back to the memory of childhood walks shared with his friend, John Fleming, when in the early hours before school the pair would circle the lake, "repeating favorite verses with one voice."[16] Past routine, and the rhythms of walking and reciting, become tangentially related to future writing and reading. While Wordsworth elaborates on this memory in Book V, he first introduces it in Book II, in which he looks ahead to a time when Fleming might read this very poem:

13. Bennett, *Romantic Poets and the Culture of Posterity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 95–115.

14. Newlyn, *Reading, Writing, and Romanticism: The Anxiety of Reception* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 92–105.

15. See Friedrich and Southwood, "Promises and Trust," 281.

16. Wordsworth, *The Thirteen-Book "Prelude"*, ed. Mark Reed, in *The Cornell Wordsworth* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), V:588. References to Wordsworth's poetry are to the Cornell editions. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by line number, except in the case of editions not previously mentioned in the body of the essay.

> With heart how full
> Will he peruse these lines, this page, perhaps
> A blank to other men! for many years
> Have since flow'd in between us; and our minds
> Both silent to each other, at this time
> We live as if those hours had never been.
>
> (II:353–58)

This looks forward to a future reading in which Fleming will look back to this present moment of writing with the heart-swelling realization that, while he had had no idea of it, in that instant a friend with whom he had long lost touch had been thinking of him. Fleming cannot know when was the "now" of "these lines" being written, nor can Wordsworth know when, or if, Fleming will ever read them. After Fleming's death in 1835, the 1850 version acknowledges the futility or fancifulness of that hope by revising "will he peruse these lines" to "would he peruse these lines!"[17]

Here, the immediacy of "these lines, this page" gives confidence to the assurance, "with heart how full / Will he peruse these lines," only to be unsettled by "perhaps," faltering at the line's end. This has the effect of checking Wordsworth's confidence in the imagined, heart-filled reading of Fleming by introducing the thought of other people's relative indifference and blankness. "Perhaps" seems momentarily to chasten his vision for the future and brings him back to the silent and indifferent present in which he and Fleming "live as if those hours had never been." Yet since it is not quite true that he is living in forgetfulness (or he would not be writing of the friendship now), the lines rather testify to the fact that, even if their friendship slips from the foreground of consciousness, it will still remain somewhere in the background. This continues to hope for the possibility of a one-sided connection continuing through absence of the kind Wordsworth is drawn to elsewhere in poems which imagine their own future reading.

A link between writing in the present and making future projections about an absent reader occurs again in Book X, when Wordsworth recalls his former schoolteacher, William Taylor. Taylor died in 1786, aged thirty-two, and his grave was inscribed with lines from Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard."

> I thought with pleasure of the Verses, graven
> Upon his Tomb-stone, saying to myself,
> He lov'd the poets, and if now alive
> Would have lov'd me, as one not destitute

17. Wordsworth, *The Fourteen-Book "Prelude"*, ed. W. J. B. Owen, in *The Cornell Wordsworth* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), II:335.

> Of promise, nor belying the kind hope
> Which he had form'd, when I, at his command
> Began to spin, at first, my toilsome Song.
>
> (X:508–14)

The conviction that moves from "he lov'd the poets" to stating, quite simply, and "would have lov'd me" need not suggest personal conceit (or not only that) so much as confidence in the generosity of the person remembered. But, again, an anticipated reading that gains assurance from the memory of past companionship falters slightly before the line comes to an end: the accolade "not destitute / Of promise" is hardly a ringing endorsement. But present success can afford to take such swipes at early endeavors. The subjunctive thought of how Taylor, "if now alive," would read and love him makes Wordsworth's present act of writing a way of keeping faith with that early "promise" nurtured by his former teacher. Taylor's "kind hope" gives Wordsworth hope in turn, inspiring him to want to do it justice. The final lines from Gray's elegy engraved on Taylor's tombstone talk of a poet whose merits "in trembling hope repose."[18]

The poetic epitaph that features frequently in Wordsworth's writings appeals to future readers in the manner of the "Pause, traveler," *siste viator*, address. But rather than a random passerby, Wordsworth has in mind here a specific individual who, paradoxically, is the intended reader of an epitaph which commemorates his own loss. The "fond fiction" that the dead could speak from the grave that Wordsworth cautions against in the "Essay upon Epitaphs" (while acknowledging the appeal of its consolation) becomes in this case a tender illusion that the dead might read from beyond the grave.[19] The speculation, *if* the dead could read *this* poem, articulated in the lines about Taylor (and in his elegy for his brother, as I discuss later) makes the present poem stand in for the absent dead in the same way the material grave is said to do.

Wordsworth's epitaphic poems have often been understood in relation to the written text's dynamics of presence and absence. The materiality of the inscribed epitaph comes to stand not only for the person who has died but also the author. "The function of the absent dead," writes Scott Hess, "parallels that of the absent author," and in Douglas Kneale's words, "the (absent) autobiographical self attempts to give itself textual form."[20]

18. Gray, "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," *The Complete Poems of Thomas Gray: English, Latin and Greek*, ed. H. W. Starr and J. R. Hendrickson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), l:139.

19. Wordsworth, *Prose Works*, II:93.

20. Hess, "Wordsworth's Epitaphic Poetics and the Print Market," *Studies in Romanticism* 50, no. 1 (2011): 55–78 (62); Kneale, *Monumental Writing: Aspects of Rhetoric in Wordsworth's Writing* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), xviii. See

But what is so strange about the moments in which Wordsworth makes the poem reach out to a lost individual as *reader*, is that the poem takes on an epitaphic quality whereby the absent dead are given a textual form that can only be realized by his or her own conjectural—and only ever conjectural—future reading.

Such a reading envisions a form of imaginative projection on the part of and on behalf of the dead similar to that which Wordsworth describes for the bereaved in his "Essay upon Epitaphs." The epitaph functions as

> a shrine to which the fancies of a scattered family may repair in pilgrimage; the thoughts of the individuals, without any communication with each other, must oftentimes meet here.[21]

The epitaph enables a coming together of the bereaved by providing a focus point for an imaginative journeying and place to repair (in both senses). Strikingly, this meeting of thoughts can happen equally for individuals "without any communication with each other." If the dead are imagined as readers, especially as readers of their own epitaphs, then they too might be brought into the fold of this meeting in absentia.

The poem "Distressful Gift" puts pressure on this line of thinking. In the wake of his brother's death, Wordsworth writes an elegy that associates reading with the binding relations of gift-giving and shared intentions at the same time as it denies that their promise of reciprocity can ever be fulfilled. The poem describes a notebook that had passed back and forth between the two brothers. It contained poems written by William, which John would take with him on his voyages as a sea captain so that, reading aboard the deck of his ship, he could still feel close to his brother back in the Lake District. When John was drowned in a shipwreck in February 1805, the notebook happened to have been left behind in Grasmere on that occasion for William to fill with more poems.[22] In the event of John's death, the book remained, a token of the brothers' bond and reminder of its severance. The book also represented all the poems written and yet-to-be written that would never be read by the person for whom they were intended. Despite this impossibility, something of the intention to share his poems with John persists in the writing of "Distressful Gift," and seems at certain points to be inscribed into its logic.

---

also: Kurt Fosso, *Buried Communities: Wordsworth and the Bonds of Mourning* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2004).

21. Wordsworth, *Prose Works*, II:93.

22. The poem was written in 1805, but Wordsworth did not publish it along with his other elegies for John. For details of the shipwreck, see Richard Matlak, *Deep Distresses: William Wordsworth, John Wordsworth, Sir George Beaumont, 1800–1808* (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 2003), 86ff.

It is a stiff, severely-wrought poem, whose severity is frequently being broken in upon by an appeal to confiding intimacy:

> Distressful gift! this Book receives
> Upon its melancholy leaves,
> This poor ill-fated Book:
> I wrote, and when I reach'd the end
> Started to think that thou, my Friend,
> Upon the words which I had penn'd,
> Must never, never look.[23]

It begins abruptly, "Distressful gift!," as if laying hands to something that its intended reader would recognize instantly—were he still alive to look. What is being given and the cause of distress borne and received all go without saying. The gift is not the book, as we might expect; rather the book "receives" the gift. Peter Swaab points out the wrong-footing effect of the poem's opening, noting that it looks at first as though "receives" will turn out to be transitive. Receives what? But when no object follows, the lines fold back on the book itself: "this poor ill-fated Book." Retracing the syntax reveals that what the book receives is what "I wrote."[24] What is received, then, is the gift of writing. And only when Wordsworth stops writing does he suddenly recall that John will never be able to read the words intended for him: "I wrote, and when I reach'd the end / Started to think." "Started" means "in surprise" here, though the line also turns on the precise moment when the thought which Wordsworth had, in the process of writing, been able to hold in abeyance, suddenly reasserts itself. Shifting between the past "I wrote" and the present moment when the book "receives" this writing, the poem's sliding of tense lets the lost possibility when John could still read persist within the present insistence that he can't: "thou, my Friend, / Upon the words which I had penned, / Must never, never look." Such severe denial chastens, without negating, the waywardly persistent hope.

Helping to carry this sense of persistence are the linking bonds of rhyme. "Distressful Gift" adopts a variation on the Burns stanza, a form Wordsworth had previously used in elegies for the poet in which rhyme traces the interrelations of time. "At the Grave of Burns" concedes that "where'er the current tends, / Regret pursues and with it blends,—"

23. Wordsworth, "Distressful Gift," *Poems, in Two Volumes, and Other Poems, 1800–1807*, ed. Jared R. Curtis in *The Cornell Wordsworth* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), lines 1–7. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by line number.

24. Swaab, "Wordsworth's Elegies for John Wordsworth," *Wordsworth Circle* 45, no. 1 (2014): 35–36.

(lines 37–38). The Burns stanza's run of three rhymes keeps the poem stalling momentarily, suspending the prospect of a reading that will never come:

> The sadly-tuneful line,
> The written words that seem to throng
> The dismal page, the sound, the song,
> The murmur, all to thee belong,
>
> (lines 10–13)

This finds a surprising number of different ways to describe writing—the line, the words, the sound, the song—without actually revealing what was written. A poem about not reading also scrupulously avoids using that verb. It is as if the poem holds within itself a secret: the fact that John must never look upon the book (the fact of his death, the impossibility of this reading) is something the poem keeps to itself and from itself.

> And so I write what neither Thou
> Must look upon, nor others now,
> Their tears would flow too fast;
> Some solace thus I strive to gain,
> Making a kind of secret chain,
> If so I may, betwixt us twain
> In memory of the past.
>
> (lines 15–21)

"And so I write" sounds convinced, its conclusiveness born out of acceptance. Not only will his brother not read this, but nobody else will either (the "others" Wordsworth protectively excludes here are Dorothy and Mary). It is at this moment that the poem drops its stiff formality. Turned now to a tentative solicitousness, "if so I may" reaches out for a confiding assurance while in despair of the response it seeks. The "secret chain" keeps open a line of possibility (as hoped for with the present tense "making," the provisional "kind of"). The book given as a gift cannot fulfill the relationship of reciprocal exchange of the kind described by Marcel Mauss; but while the transaction of giving and receiving is broken, the intention behind it keeps up a relationship of obligation.[25] As Mary Jacobus notes in her excellent essay on the poem, a secret that can only be shared with someone who has died is like a gift that can never be received or a letter that will never be read. By analogy, she writes, "elegy

25. Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (London: Routledge, 2002).

is a one-sided agreement that chains the living to the dead."[26] Like in Gerard Manley Hopkins's poem, such one-sidedness keeps up an address always held suspended in present tense: "And my lament / Is cries countless, cries like dead letters sent / To dearest him that lives alas! away."[27] And so Wordsworth's writing remains an intention to share which is never—and so always yet to be—realized.

This is what the book had been intended to do in life, to keep up a promise of communication that would have the binding effect of an unshared secret or un-received gift. The book was "to be filled" with poems by William for John to take with him on his sea voyages:

> Oft have I handled, often eyed,
> This book with boyish glee and pride,
> The written page and white;
> How have I turn'd them o'er and o'er,
> One after one and score by score,
> All filled or to be filled with store
> Of verse for his delight.
>
> He framed the Book which now I see,
> This very Book upon my knee,
> He framed with dear intent
> To travel with him night and day,
> And in his private hearing say
> Refreshing things whatever way
> His weary Vessel went.
>
> (lines 22–35)

The feel of "this book" in his hands, the look of it, its familiar weight, prompts the memory of regular habits ("oft have I handled, often eyed"). Formerly, this had brought the comforting sense that the book could "say" things in John's "private hearing" even when the two were apart—like a form of telepathy, almost. "Telepathy" sounds too mystical, yet in an earlier poem, "When to the Attractions of the Busy World," Wordsworth had described a similar, quasi-mystical form of connection. Lucy Newlyn points out the link between the two poems, both of which envision John reading or reciting his brother's poems at sea.[28] In "When to the Attractions,"

26. Jacobus, *Romantic Things: A Tree, A Rock, A Cloud* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 98.

27. Hopkins, "I wake and feel," *The Major Works*, ed. Catherine Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), lines 6–8.

28. Newlyn, *Reading, Writing, and Romanticism*, 128–30.

Wordsworth imagines the poems he had composed being repeated by John as he paces the deck, "muttering the verses which I muttered first / Among the mountains." Back home in Grasmere, Wordsworth treads the same path that John had worn around a nearby fir grove during his last visit, and as he follows the path made by his brother's feet he imagines falling into step with the rhythm of John's distant pacing aboard ship:

> while Thou,
> Muttering the verses which I muttered first
> Among the mountains, through the midnight watch
> Art pacing thoughtfully the vessel's deck
> In some far region, here, while o'er my head,
> At every impulse of the moving breeze,
> The fir-grove murmurs with a sea-like sound,
> Alone I tread this path;—for aught I know,
> Timing my steps to thine.
>
> (lines 105–13)

Their respectively muttered verses are attuned at a distance, as the murmuring of the breeze through the trees is attuned to the sound of the distant sea. The imagined connection produced by this replicated simultaneity achieves what Newlyn calls "a fantasy of convergence so strong that it can defeat separation—or even, by implication, death."[29] The poem's syntax keeps a synchronicity in play across six lines as "while Thou" waits upon "Alone I." The subsequent hedging, "for aught I know," registers the uncertainty that distance makes inevitable at the same time as it reaches across that distance for reassurance. Although John is unable to confirm, the pause of doubt feels reassured by the resuming rhythm of "timing my steps to thine." Newlyn points out an echo between John's pacing "o'er and o'er" mentioned earlier in "When to the Attractions" and the description of Wordsworth's turning "o'er and o'er" the pages of the book in "Distressful Gift," noting how this "incorporates the memory of the earlier repetitive motion of pacing into the memory of reading . . . as if once again finding that shared actions can defeat the curse of time."[30]

What is different in "Distressful Gift" is that their distantly-shared actions are not left to the chance of coincidence (the "for aught I know" of "When to the Attractions"), but are part of a deliberate plan agreed upon in advance by both brothers. This is also what marks the difference between Dorothy's more personally-directed "I am going to read" and John's imagined future reading, which persists as an intention he and William once

29. Newlyn, *Reading, Writing, and Romanticism*, 128.
30. Newlyn, *Reading, Writing, and Romanticism*, 130.

shared—even if, in the end, John is never going to read. William recalls their intentions within a repeating, reciprocating rhythm: "Oft have I handled" the pages of this book, he notes, "How have I turn'd them o'er and o'er / One after one and score by score" as part of a project in which these pages are "All filled or to be filled." John's actions, too, are incorporated into this repeating pattern: "he framed the book," "he framed with dear intent." As well as an intention or purpose, "intent" evokes a sense of focused attentiveness and, through its etymological root, a stretching or extending toward.[31] The "dear intent" with which John "frames" or prepares the book offers the brothers a means to reach toward each other through the directed act of attention that is reading.

What kind of intention might be lying behind the impulse to give a book as a gift? Taking up this question in an essay from 2007, Oren Izenberg presents a recently-ex-girlfriend with a collection of poetry and each of them, in their newly-separate lives, agrees to read over the course of a month the same poem on the same day from their separate copies of the same book.[32] Whatever personal significance this must carry for the pair, the plan also amounts to an intellectual exercise for Izenberg, one which leads him to the philosophical question of how individuals are capable of coming together to form shared intentions. He cites Raimo Tuomela and Kaarlo Miller's argument that so-called "we-intentions" depend upon a shared set of beliefs: to intend to do something together I must believe that you intend to do it too, you must equally believe that I intend to play my part, and we must each believe that the other is believing the same of us.[33] To say "we are reading," Izenberg explains,

> is to say that I am reading and that I believe that you too are reading and believing. Perhaps we will find that the reading of another is always imaginary, and in which my pleasures and satisfactions are only the bittersweet pleasures involved in fantasy and self-deception.[34]

For the Wordsworth brothers, what difference does it make to their previously-formed intentions that John can no longer uphold his side of things? And would it be different if, say, even before his death he had never once got around to opening the book aboard ship? When Izenberg discovers that while he had gone on diligently reading each day his partner had in fact given up some weeks ago, he looks to convince us (and himself) that

31. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "intent n. and v.," accessed November 1, 2019, https://www.oed.com.

32. Izenberg, "We Are Reading," *Modern Philology* 105, no. 1 (2007): 91–112.

33. Tuomela and Miller, "We-Intentions," *Philosophical Studies* 53 (1988): 375. Cited by Izenberg, "We Are Reading," 109.

34. Izenberg, "We Are Reading," 109.

the failure of his plan does not necessarily mean that he had been deceiving himself all the while:

> Let us say that in reading (quite unlike pushing a car or dancing a dance) one can discover that one's partners were illusory without concluding that one has been in the grip of hallucination.[35]

There is an important difference, Izenberg claims, between being mistaken in the nature of an action (believing that we were both reading only to find out that one of us wasn't) and being mistaken in the nature of an intention (believing that we had both intended to read only to find out there was never any sense of "we" to begin with).[36] Salvaging some form of consolation, Izenberg insists that the fact their shared intention failed is proof, at least, that it had once existed as a possibility. The failure comes to testify to "the felt loss of a capacity that I must, because I can lose it, possess." That capacity is what he terms "a preparedness for others," an instinct for sharing which follows John Searle's suggestion that collective intentions work through an innate capacity for cooperation based on our nature as social animals.[37] Ultimately, it doesn't matter if his partner gave up, because the goal of their "reading 'together apart,'" Izenberg explains, "was not to have an experience of reading in (believing) relation to another; it was to realize a capacity for relation to another in ourselves."[38]

In Wordsworth's case, this can look less like special pleading because the failure of his and John's intentions to share the book is forced by circumstance, so his belief in their capacity for shared intentions—and all that they stand for in terms of their brotherly relation and feelings of binding obligation to one another—can survive John's death. Yet Izenberg's line of thinking might help to explain why Wordsworth's poem continues to address its intended reader at the same time as denying that this reading can ever occur. The more he insists on the present impossibility, the more he confirms what had once existed as a past possibility, and both in turn confirm what in any case had always existed as a certainty: the brotherly bond implicit in this binding promise to John.

35. Izenberg, "We Are Reading," 109.

36. Izenberg cites Searle: "The assumption is that if I am mistaken it can only be because one of my beliefs is false. But on my account, it turns out that I can not only be mistaken about how the world is, but that I am even mistaken about what I am in fact doing. If I am having a hallucination in supposing that someone else is helping me push the car, that I am only pushing as part of our pushing, then I am mistaken not only in my belief that there is somebody else there pushing as well, but I am mistaken about what it is that I am doing. I thought I was pushing as part of our pushing, but that is not in fact what I was doing." Izenberg, "We Are Reading," 109.

37. Izenberg, "We Are Reading," 107.

38. Izenberg, "We Are Reading," 109.

Imagining a future reading becomes then a way of memorializing the past based on an intention that gains assurance from a shared history and so reaffirms the relationship now being commemorated. Genuine sharing also needs to take on something of this temporal shape: because sharing is always suppositional and must rely on a faith in the other person (given that another's mind is unknown and even one's own intentions might be delusions), the faith or hope that sharing relies upon is itself always bending backward: on the basis of confidence in the past, assurance is granted to joint plans. The imagined future, then, depends on (and confirms) this past. Imagining the future as memory binds the two time frames together as trust requires them to be, and helps them to become.

While questions about the binding ties of cooperation had informed eighteenth-century discussions of the social contract, the particular issue of how such bonds play out over time was brought to the fore by William Godwin, and was the basis of his famous antipathy toward promises.[39] As Godwin sees it, a promise effectively collapses time into a present moment of commitment, which impinges on one's freedom to act differently in the future: "we abridge, and that in the most essential point, the time of gaining information, if we bind ourselves to-day to the conduct we will observe two months hence."[40] His suspicion relates to how a promise commits one to act out of a sense of what is owing to another person before one can possibly know what will be the best way to act in the time to come. "What is this tenderness to which I am bound[?]" he asks in the chapter "Of Promises."[41] What makes promises so problematic for Godwin is for Wordsworth precisely the source of their appeal.

The proleptic reach of the promise—in resistance to whatever might subsequently be gained or lost in retrospect—becomes for Wordsworth a way of safeguarding or future-proofing relationship against the shocks of contingency. Lying behind "Distressful Gift" is the thought of a past commitment Wordsworth had made to his brother that is implicit in every poem he writes and which underpins his poetic vocation more broadly. As he described in a letter written soon after John's death (with touching and quite remarkable assurance):

39. For an excellent overview of the status of promises in the Romantic period, see Ian Balfour, "Promises, Promises: Social and Other Contracts in the English Jacobins (Godwin/Inchbald)," in *New Romanticisms: Theory and Critical Practice*, ed. David L. Clark and Donald C. Goellnicht (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994). See also Zoe Beenstock, *The Politics of Romanticism: The Social Contract and Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016).

40. Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, 2 vols. (London: G. G. and J. Robinson, 1796), I:201.

41. This phrase appears in the first edition but was omitted from the second (in line with Godwin's more sympathetic attitude toward personal bonds in the revised edition). Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, 2 vols. (London: G. G. and J. Robinson, 1793), I:153.

> I never wrote a line without the thought of its giving him pleasure, my writings printed and manuscript were his delight and one of the chief solaces of his long voyages. But let me stop—I will not be cast down were it only for his sake I will not be dejected. I have much yet to do and pray God to give me strength and power—his part of the agreement between us is brought to an end, mine continues.[42]

The "agreement" refers to the brothers' pact that John would make money as a sea captain to support William, who would dedicate himself to writing poetry and would thereby "do something for the world."[43] That a promise is not simply broken off but is felt to be all the more binding when the person to whom it was made dies locates a sense of comfort and reassurance similar to that which Izenberg salvages from broken shared intentions—where rupture does not negate the bond that existed before.[44] "There is a bond between us yet," Wordsworth wrote in a letter in the wake of John's drowning, "the same as if he were living, nay far more sacred."[45] "Distressful Gift" is the material record of that bond. The poem that will never be read suspends promise in the prospect of blank pages all yet "to be filled"—as a reminder of past intentions which hold to that past as part of a continuing bond in the present: "making a kind of secret chain, / If so I may, betwixt us twain / In memory of the past."

The idea of a book as a material token of promise—a promise of future reading and of more books yet to come—recurs throughout Wordsworth's poetry. Although its most urgent and poignant expression occurs in this poem to his brother, the idea had been condensed for Wordsworth much earlier in a light-hearted episode from his childhood. In the *Prelude* he recalls a boyhood treasure, "a little yellow, canvass-covered Book" (V:483), containing a selection from the *Arabian Nights*. Upon discovering that there are a thousand more where that came from, he hatches a plan with another boy to save up their pocket money to buy the other volumes.[46] "'Twas in truth, to me / A promise scarcely earthly" (V:490–91), he writes, with a mock

42. Wordsworth to James Losh, Grasmere, March 16th, 1805, in *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth. The Early Years,* 2nd edn, ed. Ernest de Selincourt, rev. Chester L. Shaver (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), 565.

43. Quoted by Jacobus, *Romantic Things*, 94.

44. The philosophical implications of death-bed promises are discussed by Friedrich and Southwood, "Promises and Trust," 285–88.

45. Wordsworth to James Losh, Grasmere, March 16th, 1805, in *Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth. The Early Years*, 547.

46. Duncan Wu writes, "this was probably *Arabian Nights Entertainments: consisting of One Thousand and One Stories . . . Translated into French from the Arabian MSS. by M. Galland of the Royal Academy; and now done into English from the last Paris Edition*, a four-volume set published first in Manchester, 1777, and frequently thereafter." *Wordsworth's Reading 1770–1799,* 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), I:6.

solemnity that still respects the grand schemes of childhood, "instantly / I made a league, a covenant with a Friend":

> Through several months
> Religiously did we preserve that vow,
> And spite of all temptation hoarded up,
> And hoarded up; but firmness failed at length,
> Nor were we ever masters of our wish.
>
> (V.491–92, 496–500)

What these lines cling to most fondly is the memory of a shared intention, the failure of which is coolly accepted in a such a way that the resumed iambics of "but firmness failed at length" grants a sense of completion nonetheless. All the hoardings up of anticipation are worth far more than the self-satisfied "mastery" that would come of finally getting what one wants. If the performative utterance of a promise is achieved in the act of its saying, in retrospect Wordsworth needs to keep on saying it until the point where he almost runs out of synonyms, naming "a league," "a covenant," "that vow," "our wish". The reiterative binding effect is hinted at too in the etymology of "league," meaning "to bind," which also relates to the sense of being bound rooted in the word "religiously."[47] Recalling those months of devotion, "religiously did we preserve" allows for the suggestion of continuity, which the revision of 1850, "we preserved / Religiously" closes off and consigns to the past (V:474–75).

While the hushed reverence ascribed to the episode gently mocks its ultimate failure, it also seems to mask and protect a cherished belief that Wordsworth saw nascent in these boyish plans. That a book should represent a "promise scarcely earthly" captures the sense of wonder which never quite left him about the way a book as a thing might enshrine non-earthly forms of thought for the future, even if its earthliness in the end made it subject to loss. And although it is just chance that the book Wordsworth recalls happens to be the *Arabian Nights*, it seems fitting that it should be a story in which the continuing deferral of narrative defends against the proleptic threat of death. Wordsworth's poetry, in the face of inevitable loss, extends and depends upon the promise of a future reading.

In J. L. Austin's classic account, promising as a performative utterance occurs as a happening in time or a putting-into-motion, so that the promise exists as a projection into the void of its fulfilment.[48] Ian Balfour's work

47. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "league n.2" and "religiously adv.," accessed November 1, 2019, https://www.oed.com.

48. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 2d edn. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975).

on promises and prophecy in the Romantic period has shown how a poem dramatizes the promise as an act of saying whose emphasis is on movement. To this end, a promise cannot be "kept" according to the familiar locution. Balfour suggests that a promise cannot be "held" or "maintained," so to speak: "for the promise, insofar as it is an act, is untenable."[49] But importantly this doesn't make it any less binding or give it any less staying power. "A promise is a promise regardless of whether or not it is fulfilled," writes Balfour: "uttered in a moment, enacting itself in a moment, whether or not it corresponds to the integrity of an intention or a will, the promise is oriented towards an unknown future that has already been changed by its very utterance."[50] A promise might not be able to be kept or held, but a book can be. For Wordsworth, the material book comes to represent a kind of holding-ground for the otherwise contentless and boundless temporality of the promise. If, for Wordsworth, writing poetry is conceived as an act of promising, since the performative nature of that promise does not rely on its ultimate fulfillment, then inherent in the material book is a bond that can be infinitely suspended in potential, and so can survive rupture and loss. The asymmetrical relationship of writing to its looked-for reading becomes an exercise in trust, a setting into motion of a binding relationship that plays out across the contingencies of time.

As Peter Larkin recognizes with his evocative title, *Promising Losses*, bound up with the idea of the promise is its flipside: the possibility of loss, non-fulfillment or brokenness. For Larkin, however, writing in the context of the Romantic visionary, such loss is not an outright negation, since "this imaginative cost," he says, "never becomes finally detached from the originating lure of living with what is promising or promissory."[51] Larkin also points to Anne-Lise François's account of how the disappointment or undercutting of visionary hope is "expressive of a freedom to repeat in the very absence of the promised return."[52] To keep clinging on to a promise, even in the knowledge of its non-return, requires a more precarious form of belief than the robust confidence Wordsworth elsewhere places in future recompense—a belief perhaps all the more cherished for being so precarious. This need not amount to a resolute, or bloody-minded, clinging on, which ends up trapping one in an attenuated present on the basis of dangling hopes for the future (in line with the pernicious dynamic Lauren Berlant defines as "cruel optimism").[53] The kind of promise Wordsworth associates with reading looks for a way to hold to

49. Balfour, "Promises, Promises," 228.

50. Balfour, "Promises, Promises," 236, 228–29.

51. Larkin, *Wordsworth and Coleridge: Promising Losses* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 1.

52. Quoted in Larkin, *Wordsworth and Coleridge*, 221n. Anne-Lise François, *Open Secrets: The Literature of Uncounted Experience* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), 156.

53. Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2011).

personal and professional attachments while also accepting that not everything can or will live up to its promise. The internal tussle between holding on and letting go, between hope, resignation, and the freedom to carry on anyway, that Wordsworth negotiates in his various reflections on reading's promise might, in turn, offer us a valuable way of approaching the question of why we should go on reading.

Why go on reading in the absence of promised returns—when it comes to professional ambition, or when it comes to teaching, where projected expectations may prove as much a burden as an incentive? The "kind hope" with which Wordsworth's schoolteacher, William Taylor, had sought to nurture promise might now vie with current concerns about the mounting pressures faced by students today. What can such promise look to in a climate of limited opportunity, anxieties about which only spark further expectations, which in turn give rise to that sinister phrase, "expectation management"? Wordsworth, looking back in the *Prelude* to his own time as a student, when he achieved only indifferent success, writes with a liberating sense that things need not always live up to their promise:

> We see but darkly
> Even when we look behind us; and best things
> Are not so pure by nature that they needs
> Must keep to all, as fondly all believe,
> Their highest promise.
>
> (III:492–96)

Perhaps this assurance comes of being able to look back, secure in the knowledge of all the unexpected returns to emerge when others fall by the wayside. The acceptance that things need not always keep to their promise still recognizes the need to keep quietly tucked away the fond belief that they must.

University of Warwick

Bibliography

Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*. Revised edition. London: Verso, 2016.

Austin, J. L. *How to Do Things with Words*. 2nd edition. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975.

Balfour, Ian. "Promises, Promises: Social and Other Contracts in the English Jacobins (Godwin/Inchbald)." In *New Romanticisms*, edited by David L.

Clark and Donald C. Goellnicht, 225–50. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994.

Baron, Michael. *Language and Relationship in Wordsworth's Writing*. London: Longman, 1995.

Beenstock, Zoe. *The Politics of Romanticism: The Social Contract and Literature*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016.

Bennett, Andrew. *Romantic Poets and the Culture of Posterity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

Berlant, Lauren. *Cruel Optimism*. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2011.

Bratman, Michael. *Faces of Intention*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

Clucas, Tom. "'The Consecration, and the Poet's Dream': Evasion and Revision in the Elegies for John Wordsworth." *European Romantic Review* 27, no. 5 (2016): 601–21.

Fosso, Kurt. *Buried Communities: Wordsworth and the Bonds of Mourning*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2004.

Friedrich, Daniel, and Nicholas Southwood. "Promises and Trust." In *Promises and Agreements: Philosophical Essays*, edited by Hanoch Sheinman, 277–94. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Godwin, William. *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*. London: G. G. and J. Robinson, 1793.

———. *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*. London: G. G. and J. Robinson, 1796.

Gray, Thomas. *The Complete Poems of Thomas Gray: English, Latin and Greek*. Edited by H. W. Starr and J. R. Hendrickson. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966.

Hess, Scott. "Wordsworth's Epitaphic Poetics and the Print Market." *Studies in Romanticism* 50, no. 1 (2011): 55–78.

Hopkins, Gerard Manley. *The Major Works*. Edited by Catherine Phillips. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Izenberg, Oren. "We Are Reading." *Modern Philology* 105, no. 1 (2007): 91–112.

Jacobus, Mary. *Romantic Things: A Tree, A Rock, A Cloud*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2012.

Ketcham, Carl. *The Letters of John Wordsworth*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1969.

Kneale, Douglas. *Monumental Writing: Aspects of Rhetoric in Wordsworth's Writing*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1988.

Larkin, Peter. *Wordsworth and Coleridge: Promising Losses*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

Lupton, Christina. *Reading and the Making of Time in the Eighteenth Century*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018.

Lynch, Deidre. *Loving Literature: A Cultural History*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014.

Matlak, Richard. *Deep Distresses: William Wordsworth, John Wordsworth, Sir George Beaumont, 1800–1808*. Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 2003.

Mauss, Marcel. *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*. Translated by W. D. Halls. London: Routledge, 2002.

Newlyn, Lucy. *Coleridge, Wordsworth, and the Language of Allusion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986.

———. *Reading, Writing, and Romanticism: The Anxiety of Reception*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

———. *William and Dorothy Wordsworth: "All in Each Other."* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

Roth, Abraham Sesshu. "Intention, Expectation, and Promissory Obligation." *Ethics* 127, no. 1 (2016): 88–115.

Searle, John. "Collective Intentions and Actions." In *Intentions in Communication*, edited by Philip R. Cohen, Jerry Morgan, and Martha E. Pollack. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990.

Shiffrin, Seana. "Promising, Intimate Relationships, and Conventionalism." *Philosophical Review* 117 no. 4 (2008): 481–524.

Tuomela, Raimo, and Kaarlo Miller. "We-Intentions." *Philosophical Studies* 53 (1988): 367–89.

Wordsworth, Dorothy. *The Grasmere and Alfoxden Journals*. Edited by Pamela Woof. Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2002.

Wordsworth, William. *The Fourteen-Book "Prelude."* Edited by W. J. B. Owen. In *The Cornell Wordsworth*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985.

———. *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth. The Early Years*. Edited by Ernest de Selincourt, revised by Chester Shaver, 2nd edition. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967.

———. *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Middle Years, 1806–1811*. Edited by Ernest de Selincourt, revised by Chester Shaver, 2nd edition. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967.

———. *Poems, in Two Volumes, and Other Poems, 1800–1807*. Edited by Jared R. Curtis. In *The Cornell Wordsworth*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983.

———. *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*. Edited by W. J. B. Owen and J. W. Smyser, 3 vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974.

———. *The Thirteen-Book "Prelude."* Edited by Mark Reed. In *The Cornell Wordsworth*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991.