

Exile at Home — Anxiety and Aspiration in Wordsworth's 'Home at Grasmere'

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It is part of morality not to be at home in one's home,' claims Theodor Adorno (39). The search for certainty and comfort which a spiritual home can supposedly provide lies at heart of a significant body of literature, yet, for Adorno and many others, it is the negotiations and paradox of feeling at home and not at home at the same time, the interactions between comfort at home and fragility of such comfort that distinguishes exciting literary works from the benign. Such power dynamics are crucial for us to make sense of Wordsworth's 'Home at Grasmere'(first finished in 1806, published in 1814). Literatures on this poem have acknowledged that the attachment to Grasmere, and the inclination to see it as something of a promised land, a paradise, are apparent throughout, but equally noticeable are the hesitation and anxiety which filter through it. Keywords such as 'fear', 'doubt', 'temporary' are already picked up by Bruce Clarke (1980), Paul Magnuson (1988), Anthony Harding (1991), Sally Bushell (2009), Polly Atkin (2010) and others.ⁱ However, these emotions need to be further explored as they underline an important drive for Wordsworth's early writing.

In 'Home at Grasmere', joyful return is contrasted with moments of loss, sorrow and estrangement that lend homecoming the colour of a self-imposed exile; moreover the home, for Wordsworth, is not to be confined in a physical place. It is rather an imaginary territory, located in his writing. Throughout the poem, writing is treated as a mission, giving the speaker a purpose and creating a space in which to negotiate and reconcile home and exile. Such negotiation decodes a large part of 'Home at Grasmere', and may prove key to understanding Wordsworth's early writing.

Our discussion begins with a metaphor. A hundred lines into the poem, the speaker, with fond recollections of the vale from childhood, asks Grasmere to take him in.

Embrace me then, ye hills, and close me in;
Now in the clear and open day I feel
Your guardianship
(129-31)ⁱⁱ

The word ‘guardianship’ is revealing. The speaker visualizes the relationship between himself and the vale as one between guardian and ward. In contrast to the relationship between a parent and a child which is biological and natural, the relationship between the guardian and the orphan is artificial, and because of this, it is prone to problems and breakage. Cheryl L. Nixon demonstrates in *The Orphan in Eighteenth Century Law and Literature: Estate, Blood and Body* (2011) that in the Eighteenth century the orphan was both a historical and a cultural phenomenon, and the practice of guardianship was common.ⁱⁱⁱ According to Nixon, orphans’ situations in most cases were determined by class status. Poor orphans were taken to the workhouse, and would be apprenticed at a certain age; richer children would be formally placed with one or several guardians, who would be responsible for any property and financial management; and the ‘middling’ orphans would be cared for by relatives or friends, usually by informal arrangement. Disagreements between guardian and orphan, for example about property management or access to finance, frequently rendered them on bad terms.

The same potential instability exists in this speaker’s relationship with Grasmere. At least three layers of meaning can be detected in this loaded comparison. The first is the fear of not deserving the vale. To call a place home needs an assertion of belonging to the place. But in ‘Home at Grasmere’, there are moments when that assertion is undermined. The speaker confesses that he was not born to be a nature admirer. ‘That in my day of childhood I was less/
The mind of Nature, less, take all in all,/ Whatever may be lost, than I am now.’ (94-95) The converted nature lover frequently recurs in Wordsworth. One may well remember the temper

in 'Nutting' when the boy ravishes the trees: 'Then up I rose,/And dragged to earth both branch and bough, with crash/ And merciless ravage (43-45); in *The Prelude*, he is 'a plunderer then/ In the high places, on the lonesome peaks,/ Where'er among the mountains and the winds/The Mother Bird had built her lodge.'*(The Prelude, 1805, Book I, 337-40)* In 'Home at Grasmere', the speaker, now more in sympathy with nature, is so overwhelmed by the favour Grasmere provides that he is worried about his unworthiness in the face of it.

Another way of deciphering this metaphor is to see how the speaker positions himself in the relationship. By comparing Grasmere to a guardian, he is entering the state of orphanhood. A sense of loss accompanies the joy of coming back to the Lake District, and overshadows it. The speaker, together with the fictionalized Emma, are two ships sailing in the storm and searching for a place called home. Later, in the MD version dated possibly from 1831-32, the orphan-hood metaphor becomes more pronounced as the speaker writes about going back to Grasmere as 'A younger orphan of a Home extinct' (78). Friendless and parentless when arriving at Grasmere, they are orphans whose lives were broken long ago. Settling back into a place known in childhood, if not quite their native place, they hope to get back on their feet again. Wordsworth does this imaginatively in 'Home at Grasmere' by seeking to connect with other lives in three stories, which are: the man with a moderate landed property who seduced a local maid and died of his guilty conscience; the widowed father who still grieves over the death of his wife but manages to live on; and the widowed woman who holds dear the memory of her deceased husband. These stories are about loss, endurance and hope, and share a feature of discontinuity. Marriages collapse, either a consequence from infidelity, or death; subsequently, families disintegrate and normal lives are interrupted. It is this shared brokenness that bonds the orphaned speaker and Emma with the dwellers of Grasmere. Together they form a community.

No, we are not alone; we do not stand,

My Emma, here misplaced and desolate.
(646-47)

Meanwhile, regardless of the speaker's will to ally himself with the life in Grasmere dwellers, he maintains the perspective of an observer and outsider, seen by the comparison of gradually unfolding Grasmere life with the landscape revealed through vapour dispersing before the traveller's eyes. It is not difficult to see why the speaker associates himself with the traveller. Years have passed while he has been away from Grasmere vale. Time and distance have already put an intangible gulf between him and the place. Edward Said describes the gulf experienced by exiles as 'the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted.' (Said 173) For Wordsworth, the rift is self-willed rather than forced, and no political persecution or banishment is involved. The sense of exile is perhaps therefore not as strong, but the contrast between the speaker and Emma's eagerness to return to Grasmere and upon arrival finding themselves as orphans or/and observers discloses the inevitable rift between them and their native place.

The rift is particularly striking when one is reminded of the enthusiasm with which Wordsworth wrote to Coleridge during the dreadful winter of 1799, when he and Dorothy walked many miles to their imagined first-home-to-be: 'will you believe me when I tell you that we walked the next ten miles, by the watch over a high mountain road, thanks to the wind that drove behind us and the good road, in two hours and a quarter, a marvellous feat of which D. will long tell.' (De Selincourt 280) The poet must be exaggerating here, because 4 miles an hour in mountains would be very fast. This spirited attitude would later be toned down to the insecurity suggested in the orphan-hood metaphor.

The unsettledness that characterises both the guardian-orphan dynamics and the traveller metaphor can also be associated with the circular narrative Kenneth Johnston notices

in the poem. Johnston argues that 'Home at Grasmere' is characterized by a sense of circularity, both in structure and in imagery. Instead of proceeding as a linear narrative, the poem turns back on itself, as if in 'a hall of mirrors' (Johnston 4). The circularity of the poem creates a tension between the mutually incompatible circumstances of settling into Grasmere and setting out on the road. Two seemingly contradictory moods are therefore running alongside each other throughout the poem: one of overwhelming joy, happiness, and the urge to establish a home; the other of loss, sorrow, and the speaker's subliminal urge to distance himself from the place. Later revision of the poem would support this distancing as intentional. Sally Bushell notices that in the final revision of 1821-32, Wordsworth replaced the word 'traveller' with 'stranger', and situated the figure not in Grasmere, but in Switzerland. Bushell further comments that 'the traveller is now emphatically not to be identified with the poet or his problems with self-situating and creative confidence' (407).

In his 1987 talk 'The Condition We Call Exile', Joseph Brodsky identifies some key characteristics of exile and especially of the writer in exile, including the feeling of displacement and misplacement and the quest for and urge to re-discover significance in a new society. A writer in exile is 'by and large a retrospective and retroactive being' (Brodsky 4); he focuses on the past, which can be easily turned into the repetitiveness of nostalgia, and delays the arrivals of the present.

To say Wordsworth in 'Home at Grasmere' fits the condition Brodsky describes would be simplistic, but there are similarities between the poet in Grasmere and the writer in exile. The place from which the speaker is banished is not a physical place, but an idealized lost home of the past. This home is irreplaceable and irretrievable. Grasmere and its people are relics of a past which is lost but firmly stamped on the speaker's mind. Fond recollections of it are repeated throughout the poem. However, unlike the process of hanging onto the past and delaying the present that Brodsky describes, the poem's speaker is looking constantly towards

the future. The aspiration in 'Home at Grasmere', like *The Prelude*, relates to experience and poetry which is still to come - so much so that the present seems to be absent. His mind is always on the road, wandering, searching for a home to lodge in.

What, then, is home to Wordsworth? In 'Home at Grasmere', the answer lies in his writing. The prospect of writing is the one thing that remains unchanged throughout the process of homecoming and efforts to settle in. Writing is a constant presence, functioning as an anchor, and by extension, forms a kind of home.

Wordsworth's attention to the writing act itself is explored by Andrew Bennett in *Wordsworth Writing* (2007). Bennett revisits the idea of writing as therapy, and argues to the contrary that there is a 'discomposing nature of writing' (152). In Wordsworth's case, acts of composition, inscription and revision inflict physical and emotional disturbances upon the poet. 'Writing produces physical ill health: it is, in a sense, itself the origin or source of physical and psychic trauma.' (152) The end result is that 'Wordsworth is not as cured so much as composed'. (151) For Bennett, the writing act is decomposing, yet in the writing process, the poet is collected, summed up in a wordplay: 'composed' through 'composing'.

Bennett draws our attention to the physical pain writing inflicts and illustrates the distilling effect of writing. However, the question is not how Wordsworth obtained composure through composing, but why, given the discomposing nature of writing, should he write at all? Writing does not simply happen to Wordsworth, and the poet does just not happen to be composed while writing. Rather, the poet actively seeks writing as a way to live. For him, writing is a necessity, an urgency, an imperative.

To begin with, a sense of being chosen and privileged makes writing an irresistible call. If nature does not have plans for him, then 'why thine they round me thus, whom thus I love?/ Why do they teach me, whom I thus revere?' (890-91). There is 'an internal brightness' 'that must not die, that must not pass away' (886-87), and he is urged to disseminate that brightness.

Possessions have I, wholly, solely mine,
 Something within, which yet is shared by none—
 Not even the nearest to me and most dear—
 Something which power and effort may impart.
 I would impart it; I would spread it wide,
 Immortal in the world which is to come.
 (897-902)

The speaker imparts by writing and there is a sense of secrecy and exclusivity in the act. ‘Possessions’ that he does not share even with his dearest ones, he would put into words. Thus a special bond, an intimacy and trust, is formed between him and writing. He hopes and trusts the writing to be ‘immortal in the world which is to come’. The aspiration that writing introduces what was private into the public sphere to be read and immortalized is shared by many writers. In *Memoir of a Dutiful Daughter* (1963), for example, Simone de Beauvoir envisages the thing being written is thereby ‘rescued from oblivion, that it would interest others, and so be saved from extinction’ (70).

Beauvoir is conscious of the outcome of writing, but for Wordsworth, there is a further significance to the practice. Not only does he aspire to write, but he also thinks and feels in writing terms, and references to writing are deeply embedded in ‘Home at Grasmere’. For instance, the speaker reflects on the realities of life as ‘so cold,/ So cowardly, so ready to betray.../As we *report* them, doing them wrong.’ (54-57, italics are mine); when at Hart-leap well, ‘dejected as we were/ Among the *records* of that doleful place’ (240-41); when on the first evening arriving at the cottage, ‘Then darkness came,/ *Composing* darkness...’ (263-64). These quotations are not necessarily about writing, but the word choices of ‘report’, ‘records’, and ‘compose’ do arguably convey a preoccupation with writing in the speaker’s mind. More definitely, when the speaker tries to establish a link with Grasmere, he writes, ‘I begin/ Already to *inscribe* upon my heart/ A liking for the small grey Horse...’ (723-25). The use of ‘inscribe’ emphasises both the writing action and its purpose, as if the world is full of ‘records’ of history composed by nature which he is bound to feel, to tell and to report.

Hints such as these, dropped here and there throughout the poem, culminate at its end when the speaker explicitly articulates the urge to write:

I would not wholly perish even in this,
 Lie down and be forgotten in the dust,

I and the modest partners of my days,
 Making a silent company in death.
 It must not be, if I divinely taught
 Am privileged to speak as I have felt
 Of what in man is human or divine.
 (903-09)

The speaker's relationship with Grasmere is unstable and prone to break, and borrows from the uneasy dynamics which exist between guardian and orphan, dweller and traveller, home and exile. By contrast, his relationship with writing is close, steady and fast and he experiences nature and the world in writing terms. References to writing unify and hold the poem together. If, as Johnston says, the poem is full of mirrors, then writing is the hall holding those mirrors. As the poem goes on, the aspiration to write gradually crystallises from nuanced hints into bold statements. Writing becomes ever more and more an anchor and a harbour, to which the rest of life is secured. The speaker dwells in thoughts of writing, either in the 'composing darkness', in the presence of 'records of [a] doleful place', or through 'inscribing' a liking for nature. Metaphorically, writing is his home.

'Home at Grasmere' also frames writing as a personal choice. In Wordsworth studies there is a generally acknowledged tension between aspiration to be great poet and ever-recurring self-doubt, as expressed in *The Prelude* and demonstrated in the poet's failure to finish *The Recluse*. Wordsworth's anxiety about posterity and the desire not to be 'forgotten in the dust' find an echo in Keats' epitaph, 'Here Lies One Whose Name Was Writ in Water'; however, while Keats expresses humility and self-deprecation, in 'Home at Grasmere' Wordsworth offers an unflinching determination to be remembered. He writes to restore and to immortalize, as is apparent when he calls for 'the prophetic sprit, Soul of Man' (1026) to offer him the guidance, so

...that my verse may live and be
 Even as a Light hung up in heaven to chear
 Mankind in times to come!
 (1032-34)

The verses, which he hopes will be immortalised, ‘Express the image of a better time’ (1045) with ‘More wise desire and simple manners’, ‘genuine freedom’ and ‘pure thoughts’, and perhaps no more tension between the rival categories of home and exile, guardian and orphan, dweller and traveller. They are to be reconciled, in the verse, in writing.

Yet, even as the speaker envisages writing as a space in which conflicting emotions of feeling grounded and displaced might negotiate and reconcile in order to bring ‘genuine freedom’ and ‘pure thoughts’, the metaphor of exile retains its pull. So, in writing about writing, Wordsworth throws in two more cases of wilful self-banishments: the choice of subject matter, and his relationship with it. He would ostracise himself from the great literary tradition, ‘Dismissing therefore all Arcadian dreams,/ All golden fancies of the golden age...’ (829-30) ‘Then farewell to the Warrior’s deeds, farewell/ All hope, which once and long was mine, to fill/ The heroic trumpet with the muse’s breath!’ (953-55) The speaker in ‘Home at Grasmere’ rejects, then, mainstream, Heroic epic writing as represented by Milton and would rather look ‘into our minds, into the mind of Man’. (989) In order to write about the mind of his race, he must not dwell with his fellow men, but travel, embarking on a journey that alludes to both the path from hell to heaven in Milton’s *Paradise Lost* and Dante’s *Divine Comedy* (1308).

For I must tread on shadowy ground, must sink
 Deep, and, aloft ascending, breathe in worlds
 To which the Heaven of heavens is but a veil.
 All strength, all terror, single or in bands,
 That ever was put forth in personal forms——
 Jehovah, with his thunder, and the quire
 Of shouting angels and the empyreal throne——
 I pass them unalarmed.
 (977-79)

The speaker’s grand scheme and determination resembles those of Satan’s in his almost heroic journey from hell, through the abyss, to the heaven, towards the end of Book II in *Paradise Lost*. But different from Satan who was banished to hell by God, the speaker volunteers for the journey of sinking deep ‘into the mind of Man’ (989), before ascending again. In his ascending,

also unlike the conceited Satan, the speaker appeals to the muse Urania or some other divine presence for guidance, like Beatrice who guided Dante through heaven in *Paradiso* of *The Divine Comedy*. ‘Urania, I shall need thy guidance, or a greater Muse, if such/ Descend to earth or dwell in highest heaven’ (974-76).

Wordsworth ends the poem by introducing a wedding metaphor, in which the mind joins the outside world in matrimony, minds ‘wedded to this outward frame of things/ In love’ (1000-01), and he would sing for this ‘great consummation’ (1004). Maybe ‘Home at Grasmere’ is not a circular narrative as Johnson observes, but there is indeed progress, as the poem travels through phases of orphan-hood to traveller aiming to be dwellers, and finally in the end arrives at a matrimony, and foreseeably, finds domestic comfort. To finally claim it, the speaker is to write, to sing ‘spousal verse’. Through writing, Grasmere will be ‘home’ after all.

Notes

ⁱ Bruce Clarke in “Wordsworth’s Departed Swans: Sublimation and Sublimity in ‘Home at Grasmere’” offers an interesting explanation of the swan image. For Clarke, Wordsworth associates the missing swans with his own sense of solicitude and anxiety brought by domestic predicament. The final departure of the swans kills off the anxiety of such association and in a way, represents the fulfillment of the repressed desire. Paul Magnuson, in *Coleridge and Wordsworth, A Lyrical Dialogue*, devotes a chapter on ‘Home at Grasmere’ which focuses on the doubts dispersed among the joyous homecoming and links them to the poet’s rivalry with Coleridge. Anthony Harding, in ‘Forgetfulness and the Poetic Self in “Home at Grasmere’” talks about the prevalent fear of solipsism in the poem. Polly Atkin in “Paradox Inn: Home and Passing Through at Grasmere” argues that Dove Cottage is more of a dwelling when passing through at Grasmere than a perpetual home. Sally Bushell in “The Making of Meaning in Wordsworth’s ‘Home at Grasmere’: Speech Acts, Microanalysis and ‘Freudian Slips’” examines examples of ‘the Freudian slip’ across Wordsworth’s manuscripts of ‘Home at Grasmere’. In the example of the traveller metaphor, Wordsworth changed the ‘traveller’ in Grasmere (in MS B, 1806) into ‘stranger’ in Switzerland (in MS D, 1831-1832). Bushell argues that such change shows Wordsworth deliberately distanced himself from Grasmere, showing less self-reassurance.

ⁱⁱ This reading of ‘Home at Grasmere’ highlights the intricate relationship between the poem and Wordsworth’s return to Grasmere in real life, making time a sensitive issue. Therefore, unless otherwise specified, lines quoted are from MS B, the first full text possibly finished in 1806, reproduced as reading text in *Home at Grasmere*, ed.

by Beth Darlington. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1977.

ⁱⁱⁱNixon refers to *The Population History of England* (London: Edward Arnold, 1981) life expectancy was short in the eighteenth century, 27.88 in 1731, which increased to 38.17 in 1776. The short life expectancy implies that a fair number of people died when their children were still young. T.H. Hollingworth's research show that in 1668-1779, 44.7% of males died between the age of 15 and 50, suggesting that a great number of under-aged children may have survived them.

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