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Home at Grasmere: A Conversation with Richard Wordsworth

Cover Page Footnote

Lecture given at the Romanticism Past and Present Institute for secondary school faculty, sponsored by Sacred Heart University and the Connecticut Humanities Council. The writers of these essays had the specific task of selecting and presenting their material with secondary school faculty and their students in mind.

JUDITH DAVIS MILLER

*Home at Grasmere:
A Conversation with Richard Wordsworth*

. . . This small Abiding-place of many Men
A termination and a last retreat,
A Centre, come from wheresoe'er you will,
A Whole without dependence or defect,
Made for itself and happy in itself,
Perfect Contentment, Unity entire.

("Home at Grasmere," ll. 165-70)

William Wordsworth's lines describe the place where he and his sister Dorothy settled in 1799 after years of separation and wandering without a real home. Their hope was that Grasmere would mark the end of their wanderings, and in fact this was the case; the Wordsworths lived in Grasmere and its environs for the rest of their lives, adding William's wife Mary to the family in 1802, and adding children as well in the normal course of events. William, Dorothy, Mary, and their children are buried in the little churchyard at Grasmere. And in this place still reside some of Wordsworth's descendants. One of these, Richard Wordsworth, a professional actor, came to Sacred Heart University in April 1988 to give a performance of his dramatic monologue, *The Bliss of Solitude*, based on the life of his distinguished ancestor. While he was here, I took the opportunity of interviewing him. What follows is an informal record of that conversation.

What first strikes the Wordsworth scholar in talking with Richard Wordsworth is the remarkable sense in which his own life is informed by the values and passions of the English Romantic poet. Students of Wordsworth are aware of the importance to the poet of the continuity of the past into the future; as he himself wrote, "The Child is father of the Man; / And I could wish my days to be / Bound each to each by natural piety." As we talked, this theme of continuity emerged like a pattern in the carpet from the texture of our conversation.

Like William, who was born in nearby Cockermonth, Richard was not born at Grasmere, but rather moved to the neighborhood, to nearby Rydal Mount, the poet's last home, when he was twelve. The actor describes the period that followed as "tremendously important formative years," and his memories of them clearly last to this day. At eighteen, he again followed in the footsteps of his ancestor, attending Cambridge University. Asked how his performance there compared with that of the poet, who is well known to have graduated without honors because of a problem with mathematics, Richard Wordsworth replied "mine was not much more distinguished than his" — adding that he had recently learned that the poet had, in fact, actually excelled in mathematics at an early age, and was in advance of his classes by the time he arrived at Cambridge, so that he put off the study for a time, lost the habit of working at it, and was thus unprepared to pursue it sufficiently to graduate with honors.

The connection with the past also became clear as Richard Wordsworth talked about the awakening of his interest in book collecting:

Some books have a value apart from reading. I used to think that only books which one read were of value, but I do see now that there can be books which are much too valuable to use in the ordinary way, but at the same time they are fun to have. I'll tell you a story about one which really started me off collecting. I was working on *The Bliss of Solitude*, and I was reading the Coleorton letters, which are the letters between Sir George Beaumont and the Wordsworths. My father had died not many months before; he'd left me all his books, and I had them in the living room downstairs. I was reading a letter from Dorothy to Lady Beaumont, and Dorothy said, "Dear Lady Beaumont, Thank you so much for the copy of Walton's *The Compleat Angler*. I was fascinated to read it; however, William has now taken it for his evening's reading." And I stopped there, and I thought, "I've got that book downstairs." I raced downstairs and I got the book out and there it was: "1803 — to Dorothy

Wordsworth, from Lady Beaumont." And of course from then on I became a book collector. It was like a sort of terribly exciting detective story. I thought, "This was the very book that he'd taken from Dorothy for his evening's reading!" So those books, I'm sure everyone would agree, are worth keeping, and you don't want to use them as texts for any talks or other purposes.

As the conversation moved on from Richard Wordsworth's interest in collecting and filling his home with books and works of art associated with his ancestor, further biographical similarities became clear. Like William Wordsworth, Richard returned to Grasmere as an adult after years of peregrinations in Australia, the United States, and various parts of Great Britain as a touring actor. Taking up residence at Rydal Mount, he later moved to a place of his own at High Scaur Crag, overlooking Grasmere, but retains his connection with William Wordsworth through, among other things, his responsibilities as the director of the International Wordsworth Conference at Grasmere.

Those who have attended the conference can attest to Richard Wordsworth's fondness for another of William and Dorothy's pursuits: walking. Each morning at 7:30 during the conference, which is held during the first two weeks of August, he leads a group in a brisk walk around the circumference of Grasmere Lake — rain or shine. Asked about this, he remarked on Dorothy's walking habits, pointing out that she sometimes walked to Ambleside and back, six to eight miles each way, twice a day to find out whether any letters had arrived from William. He added that he tries when possible to read some of Wordsworth's poetry *in situ*, taking groups up to Michael's Nook and reading "Point Rash Judgement" at the very spot along the shore of Grasmere Lake where Wordsworth composed the poem.

Our talk then turned to the village of Grasmere itself. Asked how much it remains the same and how it has changed since William Wordsworth's day, Richard responded:

There are some pretty shaming things that have been done in Grasmere, I'm afraid. There are many

villages much less spoiled. But only because Grasmere by its situation is one of the scenic crowns, and people do flock here in such numbers. And, of course, the actual presence of Wordsworth has probably increased it a bit and made it very generally known as a mecca of the English Romantic movement. But if you compare Grasmere to ninety-nine out of a hundred places, it's pretty dazzling still. There are virtually no houses on the lake, for instance.

Indeed, as the conversation progressed it became clear that Grasmere suffers from the dilemma that plagues all places that attract tourists, as its one thousand residents feel that they are invaded by vast amounts of people each summer, and yet recognize that they, as Richard put it, "absolutely depend on the visitors for survival." Ironically, it is the incursions of the modern age that have made the inhabitants of Grasmere vale even more dependent on tourists; sheep farming, which was traditionally a source of income for some, has all but been destroyed because of radioactive fallout from the atomic disaster at Chernobyl. What farming remains, according to Wordsworth, is largely a matter of making a place look charming." This intrusion and the intrusion of British Air Force jets that roar over the valley approximately once each day serve as reminders to residents that the seclusion and isolation of what Richard Wordsworth calls "this beautiful little peaceful valley, filled with tranquility and happiness," is only an illusion.

Perhaps one of the most symbolic battlegrounds between traditional and modern sensibilities is Grasmere churchyard itself. Richard Wordsworth laments:

You see people quite often picnicking in the churchyard. Inevitably, no matter how careful you are, it leaves a mess. Once or twice, I've asked people to go, and they're quite nice about it. I remember last year once I said, "I think you ought to know that there's a funeral in about twenty minutes, and they'll be walking right across your picnic."

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For Wordsworth, the problem is that tourists treat as a tourist attraction what for him is a place of worship. He pointed out, "My parents were almost the last people to be buried in the churchyard," and he told the story of maintaining the graves himself when it became necessary, adding that he has been mistaken for the caretaker at times by tourists coming to visit the graves of his ancestors. He and his wife Sylvia are active members of Grasmere church; she taught Sunday School there until recently, and he obviously takes great pleasure and pride in the church's appearance and activities.

This led to my final question: what is Grasmere like in the winter, before the tourists come? Here, Richard Wordsworth waxed poetic:

The absolute great time is Christmas. The church is so lovely on Christmas day. Throughout the winter Grasmere reverts back to its one thousand inhabitants, and if you walk as I do with Syl, and somebody passes, Syl is able to identify everyone. Everybody knows everybody in the village. The place is simply beautiful.

Indeed, despite the tourists Grasmere remains a small village that does not experience a changing population, except through the natural life cycles of birth, marriage, and death. Richard Wordsworth elaborated: "The names in the churchyard on the stones or in the church are the same names over and over again. I could name you half a dozen family names which keep recurring." As a matter of fact, during the course of the conversation Richard Wordsworth mentioned meeting on the street a woman named Molly Fisher, a name well-known to students of William Wordsworth's biography as that of William and Dorothy's housekeeper when they first moved to Grasmere. He added, "My brother and I remember playing cricket for Grasmere village. The same names that we remember in those days — mind you, that's only going back a single lifetime — recur. Syl will say that some of the names of the little girls in her Sunday School class are the same as sixty or seventy years ago." This continuity of names, appropriate with respect to a poet whose "Poems on the Naming of Places" indicate the importance he placed on the subject, is repeated in Richard Wordsworth's own family: "We

are the least inventive family! The only names we know are Christopher, Richard, John, and William, and the names recur over and over again. And Mary and Dorothy, endlessly.”

As our conversation drew to a close, Richard Wordsworth mentioned having recently studied “Home at Grasmere,” in preparation for reading it at this year’s Wordsworth Winter Conference: “I found it most rewarding preparing those readings. They were very popular.” As I remarked that I found it one of the most celebratory poems that Wordsworth wrote, filled with exuberant happiness, he agreed: “I love that bit where the lake is so obviously pleased with itself and its island; it’s so happy and it’s having such a wonderful time. It’s very moving.” The poet’s pleasure in having found such a beautiful home is obviously mirrored by his great great grandson, whose love of his adopted yet at the same time ancestral home shows forth as he describes it. His final act of natural piety, perhaps, comes as he talks of a distant future in which, he hopes, some little corner of the churchyard can be found where his ashes can be placed to join those of his ancestors. Such a “termination and a last retreat” would be appropriate indeed for this great-great-grandson of the poet who wrote “Home at Grasmere.”