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This essay is based on a talk delivered at Sacred Heart University on March 31, 1987 as part of a lecture series dedicated to the memory of Daniel Friedman Gottlieb and Max Dickstein.

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MICHAEL G. COOKE

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"A simple produce of the common day."
Wordsworth, "Prospectus" to The Excursion

"...Common things / Surprise us."
Gwendolyn Brooks

Two things must surprise us about the so-called underworld of classical times. One, it was not very deep, not far at all from everyday, walking-around life. And two, it didn't even need to be down, or under; the dead (or the daring) went our beyond the limits of the recognized, constituted, incorporated world into the dimensions of shades.

The basic condition of the classical dead must be regarded, then, as one of exclusion. The dead have food as well as feelings, but they may not share ours any more than we — the few who win the privilege of dealing with them — may share theirs.

A sense of exclusion, while sharpest in relation to the dead, really pervades literature up through the eighteenth century. A consciousness of kinship and property in Beowulf flatly denies any sympathy to Grendel or his dam (the very term "dam" condemns the entire class — not to belong to the in-group is to be a monster or a dragon). In the medieval period and the Renaissance, a consciousness of sin or of social status serves to keep up a pattern of exclusion, and though the middle class is supposed to be coming into its own by the beginning of the eighteenth century, it is clear from Fielding's Tom Jones and Goldsmith's She Stoops to Conquer that only the forms and formulas of exclusion go through any change.

The feeling of exclusion continues intact. Sterne may write A

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Sentimental Journey through France and Italy, but sentimentality when it catches on becomes a fresh source of superiority and exclusion. It is one of the paradoxes of Gray's defense of the excluded in the "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" that he invites us to regard the lowly rustic as "a mute, inglorious Milton" rather than someone distinctive or worthwhile in himself. Gray slaps a soulful mask on the rustic, then gives him a place by virtue of the mask. Though the mute one may not be out-and-out excluded, he remains unidentified, lost in the multitudinous category of non-Miltons.

In general, only the tradition of the quest works to offset the impulse toward exclusion. This occurs in two ways. The quest suggests that what is alien may ultimately prove beneficial, and it introduces an entirely new scale into the geography of exclusion, breaking down the tightness, even the claustrophobia we see everywhere from The Odyssey to The Vicar of Wakefield. Of course the quest can give the appearance of having an exclusivity all its own, since so few can bring it off; only Sir Galahad, for example, can reach the Holy Grail. But the rest really experience failure, not exclusion. What the quest system has in common with the system of exclusion is a way of holding to norms, to a central governing structure of thought that stands as a fixed ideal.

We may see the true advent of romanticism in the undoing of the system of exclusion and the quest system alike. Byron's Childe Harold's Pilgrimage bears a title redolent of the quest, with little of the necessary substance. It is a loosely linked train of episodes, indulging in a more emotional than spiritual fervor, and without any stable or plausible goals. It happens upon, rather than attains, its final vision of reconciliation.

Shelley's Alastor is the closest thing we find to a quest, but significantly the quest proves to spring from an illusion. The ideal exists in everyday, in the form of the Indian Maiden, but a mere image of something beyond possesses the visionary's mind. A cliché of the "ideal" as remote and perilous dominates the action, while the new, available ideal remains unrecognized and unworkable. In some sense romanticism arises to repair a certain neglect of everyday, an over-zealousness for a pseudo-Platonic transcendence. It sets out to explore numerous currents and deposits of actuality that the
mainstream, imperious and possessive as it was, had cut off. Nowhere is this shift more pronounced than in the treatment of women.

The place of women in the new romantic dispensation has been tellingly scrutinized by Margaret Homans, Mary Poovey and Nina Auerbach, for example, and in more of a selectively psychoanalytical vein by Brenda Webster. I think it necessary first to look at the fact of women in romantic literature, and at the fact that women a.) take a more important and complex part in that literature than they used to before, and b.) appear in more important and complex conditions than had been the case before. In a noticeable degree this point holds true also for children and old men, who had traditionally shared with women the short end of the social stick, or negligible slice of the cultural pie.

Perhaps there are few romantic heroines, outstanding figures who control practical affairs and the imagination alike. But let us think of the status of the men in the literature. The manly type, the figure of prowess or genius as a prepotent character does occur, but usually at the beginning of stories in which he fares less than well. The Byronic hero, as witness even Mazeppa and Manfred, cools and shrinks into contemplation, regret, and silence. Whether in Byron or Blake or Keats, the highly manly one fares less than well, ending up chastened or isolated or transformed. Notable manliness becomes almost a sign of presumption.

It becomes possible in this light to see women in English romantic literature as part of a new questioning about what is reliable or central. For the non-heroine, the ordinary woman is not only portrayed with unprecedented clarity, she is also seen as a new force. In its complex treatment of women English romantic literature launches a double attack on the tradition, by including what used to be excluded, and by finding the ideal not by quest but by the way, in the ordinary at home.

A revaluation of the ordinary may be found alike in Wordsworth’s “The Solitary Reaper” and in Jane Austen’s Mansfield Park. Fanny Price’s low status at the outset is obvious enough, just as her slowly surging nature and eventual authority come home as a transformation without loss of familiarity. We may need to remind ourselves,
though, that Wordsworth's highland lass is precisely the sort that the
knight in Chaucer's _Wife of Bath's Tale_ would have assaulted, but
Wordsworth does not even approach her. Though preoccupied with
the everyday chore of reaping, she transmits to him through her song,
even though he cannot understand the mere words, a feeling of
something for which he wishes he had words: "Will no one tell me
what she sings?"

It is fair to say that Wordsworth tries to find words for a variety
of ordinary women generating extraordinary effects in ordinary
experience. "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal" stands without even the
conjectures that fill out "The Solitary Reaper," moving abruptly
from a sense of transcendence in the woman ("that could not feel /
the touch of earthly years") to the stunned acknowledgement of
death. The poem is unique in showing Wordsworth participating
directly, totally in female power, not just appreciating it _ab extra_ as
with the reaper.

"A slumber did my spirit seal," he confesses, "I had no human
fears"; and we have to recognize that his sense of immunity, even
transcendence, comes from a perfect, quasi-oneiric identification
with the state of the woman he is commemorating: "She seemed a
thing that could not feel / the touch of earthly years." Here is the aura
of the Shelleyan ether, which romanticism typically exposes as
illusion, and Wordsworth comes with wrenching abruptness to that
exposure: "No motion hath she now, no force." But he continues to
participate, as a stunned discoverer, in the woman's mortality. The
dominant note in the poem is not irony, but continuity of participation
across contradictions in experience.

The sense of participation appears less in "She Dwelt Among
the Untrodden Ways," but there is also less bewilderment; we seem to
be between "A Slumber" and "The Solitary Reaper as Wordsworth
pitches in the characteristic metaphors:

A Violet by a mossy stone
Half hidden from the eye;
Fair as a star when only one
Is shining in the sky.
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The violet is of course both ordinary and rare, and it is a measure of the speaker's absorption that he is both describing and metamorphosing Lucy in these lines. She becomes virtually mythological as her value changes from negligible to precious (star, violet), and this in the teeth of her change of condition from alive to dead: the violet and stone suggest a grave. It is impossible to tell from the lines whether a.) Lucy is the one like a violet and like a star, severally, in the speaker's eyes, or whether b.) Lucy is like a violet and it is fair as a star. Wordsworth is making associations that switch or unsettle our usual perspective without losing us focus or balance.

We would do well here to recall how Pope consoles the vain Belinda for the loss of her cherished hair, by making the hair into a star for worship. With Wordsworth the stakes are higher — Lucy loses her life, not a lock of hair; and there is no consolation as such, only a new recognition of being. Wordsworth's interest takes on metaphysical valences, where Pope's are social and ethical. No wonder Wordsworth mourns, while Pope cajoles.

By the same token, Wordsworth nowhere comes out with the kind of summary, epigrammatic assurance about women that Pope practices in the Second Moral Épistle: Of Women. For one thing Wordsworth seems to deal with individual women, even at his stuffiest (e.g., "Laodamia"). He is also, as a rule, taken or thrown off guard, and if he has in his makeup more of a parent's than a lover's passion, this does not stop him from being fascinated with the presence and power of women.

"Nutting" is an oblique testament to that fascination, to his struggle to find a gesture and not just words adequate to his susceptibility. And in "The Thorn," where the old sea-captain mistakes the huddled Martha Ray for a sheltering rock against a squall of rain, it seems to me proper to see Wordsworth recognizing an irreducible and incomprehensible power in women — a capacity to become a refuge and a force against the storms of life — regardless of how low they may seem to have been brought.

In justice it must be brought out that Wordsworth's reverent and impassioned conjectures about the power of the ordinary in women have a careful, and perhaps timorous vein. He was stiffer, let us say more priggish than necessary, as a defensive rather than in instinctive
maneuver. The opening poem of *Memorials of a Tour on the Continent, 1820* certainly brings out a degree of gynecogenic alarm very much at odds with the image of the well-established, upstanding poet half a century old. The poem, entitled “Fish-Women — On Landing at Calais,” is in the form of a sonnet, a form which Wordsworth had cultivated for its restraint and continence, likened by him to a nun’s “narrow [convent] room.” But there is nothing nun-like here:

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Tis said, fantastic ocean doth enfold
The likeness of whate'er on land is seen;
But if the Nereid Sisters and their Queen
Above whose heads the tide so long hath rolled,
The Dames resemble whom we here behold,
How fearful were it down through opening waves
To sink, and meet them in their fretted caves,
Withered, grotesque, immeasurably old.
And shrill and fierce in accent! Fear it not:
For they Earth's fairest daughters do excel;
Pure undecaying beauty is their lot;
Their voices into liquid music swell,
Thrilling each pearly cleft and sparry grot,
The undisturbed abodes where Sea nymphs dwell.
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Wordsworth’s recoil from the “fish-women” is influenced by his eyes and ears (grotesque, shrill), but also by his memories. He is returning to France, to the country of Annette Vallon, whom he loved and left in the 1790s to bear his illegitimate child. His reaction is also influenced by sexuality and by the possible imagination of falling, again, now an old man, into the throes of the flesh with an old woman (“withered, grotesque”). But his reaction, for all its intensity and depth, is carefully managed. “Tis said” immediately creates a distance, even a kind of rhetorical artifice about the experience. The mythology here has none of the eruptive surprise we meet with in the middle stanza of “She Dwelt Among the Untrodden Ways.” Wordsworth turns almost Homeric in its deployment, and certainly lofty in dismissing fear and saving the myth, which he has invoked,
from the reality he has had thrust in his face. His recoil of dread, at seeing too much meaning concentrated in a brief, casual space, comes under instant artistic control and emotional manipulation. Instead of advancing into myth, as with Lucy, he relapses into myth, dealing with women collectively, artificially, and circumventing the power he wishes not to feel.

We know that Coleridge in various ways resented Wordsworth's dogmatism and formality in dealing with complex human feelings. The question is why Dorothy Wordsworth, who stood much closer to Wordsworth for a much longer time than Coleridge, seems not to have conceived any such resentment. We have no direct indication that she recognized his insight into women's power, or his incomplete struggle to bring it to language. It seems unlikely, though, that in the course of a long life she would have registered no trace of the procrustean control over people and emotions evident in "Fish Women." Could Dorothy, of whom Wordsworth said "she gave me eyes, she gave me ears," have been so blind and deaf? Is there no evidence that she was more than what DeQuincey called her, "the tenderest and most faithful of domestics," born "to love [Wordsworth] as a sister; to sympathize with him as a confidante; to counsel him; to cheer him and sustain him by the natural expression of her feelings"? In other words, is Wordsworth recognizing a power in the ordinary woman that one of the women nearest to him does not share?

One entry in Dorothy Wordsworth's Grasmere Journals suggests that even she, ever generous and long suffering, harbored consciousness that other women, like Mary Wollstonecraft and Maria Edgeworth and Jane Austen, would more frankly enunciate. It is Tuesday, 20 April 1802:

A beautiful morning. The sun shone. William wrote a conclusion to the poem of the Butterfly — 'I've watched you now a full half-hour'. I was quite out of spirits, and went into the orchard. When I came in, he had finished the poem. We sate in the orchard after dinner — it was a beautiful afternoon. The sun shone upon the Level fields, and they grew greener beneath the eye. Houses, village, all cheerfu—
people at work. We sat in the Orchard and repeated *The Glow-worm* and other poems. Just when William came to a well or a trough, which there is in Lord Darlington's park, he began to write that poem of *The Glow-worm*, not being able to write [*for 'ride'] upon the long trot — interrupted in going through the town of Staindrop, finished it about 2 miles and a half beyond Staindrop. He did not feel the jogging of the horse while he was writing; but, when he had done, he felt the effect of it, and his fingers were cold with his gloves. His horse fell with him on the other side of St. Helen's Auckland. — So much for *The Glow-worm*.6

Nothing can account for the loss of sinew, in the opening sentences, as we move between "A beautiful morning" and "I was quite out of spirits," except William's presenting another poem, directly or indirectly occasioned by her perceptivity. There is real bite in this passage. We hear a sense of injured dignity and fatigue at the endless demands of Wordsworth's poetic attitude no less than his athletic ineptitude. The Freudian slip, "not being able to write [*for 'ride'] upon the long trot," absolutely confirms itself with the pointed observation: "His horse fell with him on the other side of St. Helen's, Auckland." And there is a wicked putdown of the poet-athlete in the next phrase: "So much for *The Glow-worm*.

The feelings of frustration that course through this entry appear plangent and terrible in an earlier one, of 3 September 1800, when Dorothy is recording going to "a funeral at John Dawson's":

Coleridge, Wm., and John went from home, to go upon Helvellyn with Mr. Simpson. They set out after breakfast. I accompanied them up near the Blacksmith's. A fine coolish morning. I ironed until 1/2 past 3 — now very hot — I then went to a funeral at John Dawson's. About 10 men and 4 women. Bread, cheese, and ale. They talked sensibly
and cheerfully about common things. The dead person, 56 years of age, buried by the parish. The coffin was neatly lettered and painted black and covered with a decent cloth. They set the corpse down at the door; and, while we stood within the threshold, the men with their hats off sang with decent and solemn countenances a verse of a funeral psalm. The corpse was then borne down the hill, and they sang till they had got past the Town-End. I was affected to tears while we stood in the house, the coffin lying before me. There were no near kindred, no children. When we got out of the dark house the sun was shining, and the prospect looked so divinely beautiful as I never saw it. It seemed more sacred than I had ever seen it, and yet more allied to human life. The green fields, neighbours of the churchyard, were as green as possible; and, with the brightness of the sunshine, looked quite gay. I thought she [italics added] was going to a quiet spot, and I could not help weeping very much. When we came to the bridge, they began to sing again, and stopped during four lines before they entered the churchyard. The priest met us — he did not look as a man ought to do on such an occasion — I had seen him half-drunk the day before in a pot-house. Before we came with the corpse one of the company observed he wondered what sort of cue our Parson would be in! N.B. It was the day after the Fair. I had not finished ironing till 7 o'clock. The wind was now high and I did not walk — writing my journal now at 8 o'clock. Wm. and John came home at 10 o'clock.

If people are talking “sensibly and cheerfully about common things,” and the coffin and the ritual are “decent,” what can set her to weeping but her own private thoughts, overwhelming all conditions including the “divinely beautiful” prospect, just as in the entry of 20 April 1802, already cited? Clearly her thoughts are of her own state,
and of her own death. Or rather her thoughts are of her own life, wasted in having "no [effective] near kindred, no children," and wanting its own "quiet spot" that seems probable only in death. Her sense of something "sacred" in the landscape, with both the landscape and the sacredness "allied to human life," also represents a rare level of philosophical freight in her writings. An undernote of mourning for opportunities missed, capacities too long fallow, connections never made, echoes through the passage, giving the absence of "near kindred" and of "children" a poignant metaphorical extension. The ordinary woman Dorothy writes about evokes an extraordinary response of identification, of human longing, and of complex placement in a scheme of transcendent beauty and value (divine landscape, the "sacred"). The very fact that Dorothy withholds the gender of the deceased until very late in the entry would create a mask of impersonality or detachment that her true nature cannot take refuge behind; Dorothy projects her life unto the deceased, and weeps twofold, in the cheerless house and at the ultimate destiny ("the quiet spot").

This is one of the few passages Dorothy pens that stand comparison with her brother, who had gone off to Helvellyn while she a.) ironed, b.) went to a harrowing funeral, then c.) ironed some more, d.) gave up her evening walk, and e.) wrote her journal, before he "came home at 10 o'clock." Hers has been a full day, perhaps too full, of action and emotion alike; his has been full of prospect, of controlled stimulation, of leisure.

The sacrifice Dorothy makes and William assumes and exacts can be seen as a central issue for Mary Wollstonecraft in her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and for Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Wollstonecraft critiques and exhorts the society to recognize that neglect of the ordinary woman leads to extraordinary harm, while cultivation would yield corresponding good; and Shelley dramatizes the harm that the male search for infallible perfection entails, indicating that neglect of the ordinary produces death and desolation. What we can only infer from Dorothy Wordsworth, and that rarely, Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Shelley drive explicitly home.

We may wonder why Mary Shelley did not make Frankenstein's
monster a female, to represent the state of social creation by the male sex. But of course Frankenstein would have first made a male, and more importantly the monster encapsulates the effects of male one-sidedness and arrogance upon males, as well as numerous females. Frankenstein's inability to deal with the ordinary, to enter truly into the romantic mind, does not mean that he can escape the ordinary. In fact he produces it. The monster is ordinary, in an environment so obsessed with some fixed idea of human perfection that he never has a chance to be anything but perverted. It is possible that he is hideous mainly in not being perfect, or in not being loved. Or perhaps he has the hideousness that a rationalist perfectionist like Frankenstein would see in the ordinary, and that even a Wordsworth in a weaker moment on the jetty at Calais would see in the harmless fish-women.

Some passion for a unique (i.e., not commonly perceived) perfection enters like a hangover from neo-classicism into the romantic scheme. This passion lies behind the illusory creativity of Frankenstein, as behind the illusory quest of Alastor. It is the passion that drives Goethe's Faust as well as the autobiographical protagonists in Hazlitt's Liber Amoris and Byron's Manfred to fail to see the ordinary women they are dealing with in Gretchen and Sara and Astarte, respectively. As a result, they fail to see what Wordsworth intuits in the Lucy poems and elsewhere, the extraordinary beauty that may inhere in the ordinary. The failure leads simply to death or despair, best expressed by Hazlitt when he finally, but too late, gets over forcing the myth of the Madonna or Magdalen or witch on Sara:

Her image seems fast 'going into the wastes of time,' like a weed that the wave bears farther and farther from me. Alas! Thou poor hapless weed, when I entirely lose sight of thee, and for ever, no flower will ever bloom on earth to glad my heart again!

It is hard not to hear Wordsworth's spontaneous tribute, "a violet by a mossy stone," over against Hazlitt's "poor hapless weed." Both outcries are inspired by mourning, and if both writers have
flowers in mind, whether for immediate appreciation or depreciation of an ordinary woman, neither has any real prospect for their flower. In the same way, Byron’s Haidée in *Don Juan* is memorialized as a flower, but no matter how deeply we may be moved by Byron’s elegiac tribute to Haidée (“That isle is now all desolate and bare”), and by Byron’s bringing her back for a rare recollection late in the poem, we must note that it is easier to praise the dead than the living, easier to live with a memory in a niche than with a dynamic living person.

The cultivation of the “flower” of the ordinary, in English romanticism, really comes at the hands of women, though men give the ordinary its most vivid images. Jane Austen affords us the most careful and most telling portrait of the unsuspected power of the ordinary, in the person of Fanny Price. She also presents the subtlest picture of the need for the ordinary, in *Emma*.

Jane Austen opens the novel, of course, in an atmosphere hardly calculated to conjure up the ordinary:

Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings in existence; and had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her.

Suppose we did not know about the character, judgment, and general consciousness of someone who could come into maturity with “very little to distress or vex her,” suppose, that is, we did not let ourselves suspect a habit of psychic evasion on her part, we still could not purely enjoy her state of “blessings,” because it clearly is about to come to an end. Distress and vexation are in the offing; Jane Austen clearly anticipates this.

The question is whether that impending change will stem from an external cause such as the unexpected marriage of her governess-cum-friend, Miss Taylor, or from the slow build-up of inner consequences attendant on Emma’s way of life. Even before we hear
Jane Austen on “the real evils” of Emma’s situation” (p. 1; italics added), we may note the ominous force of the verb “seemed” in the opening accolade: “Emma . . . seemed to unite some of the best blessings” (italics added). And it will not be long before we begin to pick up disturbing signals around her three positive attributes: handsome, clever, and rich. For her wealth makes her manipulative, her cleverness makes her presumptuous, and her handsomeness makes her insensitive.

_Emma_ may be construed as a course in learning the value of the ordinary, and giving over the putative “blessings” of being special. Emma keeps trying to push people and situations into an interesting or elegant conformation, demanding aesthetic and intellectual finality where moral and spiritual involvement and evolution would better fit the case. W.L. Renwick commends _Emma_ for offering “the vision of human minds and feelings in a natural world,” but this is a vision very slowly achieved against a stubborn and intricate resistance on Emma Woodhouse’s part. She is not exactly a loose cannon, but something of a misguided missionary who must give over pre-eminence and petulant control over others, for truly thoughtful and sensitive participation.

I do not think _Emma_ presents the ordinary, or relatively ordinary woman (variously Harriet Smith and, more tellingly, Jane Fairfax and Miss Bates) with anything like the substance or articulation we find in _Mansfield Park_. But these two novels may be conceptually paired: _Mansfield Park_ shows in Fanny Price the development of the ordinary woman into the fulness of her powers, while _Emma_ shows the superficially extraordinary or exempt woman — Emma Woodhouse — coming to terms with the value of the ordinary in others and, ultimately, with the vital presence and boon of the ordinary in herself. These revaluations of the ordinary, it should be stressed, have a metaphysical flavor. The question of position in society gives way to the quality of the being in itself and in its root relationship with others.

Emma learns that “to value simplicity and modesty” cannot be a matter of being “in the humor” for it; rather, it is a fundamental value of life. Richardson’s heroines and Fanny Burney’s may wish to escape from the calculus of social position, but the eighteenth
century does not, even in Rousseau’s *Nouvelle Heloïse*, seem ready to develop an adequate structure for that. In her unspectacular way, in a way quietly suited to the very ordinariness she was mining and minting, Jane Austen in the first two decades of the nineteenth century found heroines or rather non-heroines equal to that feat.

I would like to suggest that an example for Jane Austen, or at least a manifesto, was generated by Maria Edgeworth in the “Preface” to *Castle Rackrent*:

The prevailing taste of the public for anecdote has been censured and ridiculed by critics, who aspire to the character of superior wisdom: but if we consider it in a proper point of view, this taste is an incontestible proof of the good sense and profoundly philosophic temper of the present times. Of the numbers who study, or at least who read history, how few derive any advantage from their labors! The heroes of history are so decked out by the fine fancy of the professed historian; they talk in such measured prose, and act from such sublime or such diabolical motives, that few have sufficient taste, wickedness or heroism, to sympathize in their fate. Besides, there is much uncertainty even in the best authenticated antient or modern histories; and that love of truth, which in some minds is innate and immutable, necessarily leads to a love of secret memoirs and private anecdotes. We cannot judge either of the feelings or of the characters of men with perfect accuracy from their actions or their appearance in public; it is from their careless conversations, their half finished sentences, that we may hope with the greatest probability of success to discover their real characters. The life of a great or of a little man written by himself, the familiar letters, the diary of any individual published by his friends, or by his enemies after his decease, are esteemed important literary curiosities. We are
surely justified in this eager desire to collect the most minute facts relative to the domestic lives, not only of the great and good, but even of the worthless and insignificant, since it is only by a comparison of their actual happiness or misery in the privacy of domestic life, that we can form a just estimate of the real reward of virtue, or the real punishment of vice. . . . After we have beheld splendid characters playing their parts on the great theatre of the world, with all the advantages of stage effect and decoration, we anxiously beg to be admitted behind the scenes, that we may take a nearer view of the actors and actresses. \textsuperscript{11}

This explicitly goes against Johnsonian principles for biography and also against neo-classical notions of generality of application, as far as character is concerned. Edgeworth seems to be summoning up a kind of interest in the ordinary as the source of truth, sympathy, real substance. Her view is close to Wordsworth's in the "Preface" to \textit{Lyrical Ballads}, and should lead us to reconsider whether she does not fall on the romantic side of the cusp between the 18th and the 19th centuries.

The metaphysics, indeed the quietly exalted metaphysics of the ordinary enters significantly into the romantic scheme, and is expressed significantly around and by women. But there is one figure for whom the concept of the ordinary seems rather out of keeping. That figure, William Blake, might almost seem to have renounced the ordinary, as he appears to decry the very initiative that gives women a new prominence in romanticism. As Los cries in \textit{Jerusalem}, "O, Albion, why didst thou a Female Will Create?" (III.56.43).

Perhaps it will get us a little way toward a reasonable, and reasonably brief response to note that Blake sees "Man in the Resurrection" changing his "Sexual Garments at Will." Presumably the Female Will then would be — interchangeably with the Male Will — a mere manifestation of human redemption, shared by male and female (terms which of course "in Resurrection" lose all opposition or limitation). We find, in fact, that a dark correspondence exists, in
generation, between the Female Will and masculine failings, deceits, and confusions. Properly, naturally the female is the necessary counterpart of the male, in Blake's view; he never says the reverse, it is true, and that may rankle in the twentieth century. But there appears a real equality of effect, if not of titles — the males go to pieces (all but literally in the case of Tharmas, in *The Four Zoas*) when their females are removed from them. Ahania appears as Urizen's "parted soul" in *The Book of Ahania* (1.32), and Urizen certainly behaves like a soulless man.

The Female Will becomes more prominent and more problematical in exact proportion to the misdeeds and misunderstandings of the males. This holds true in *The Visions of the Daughters of Albion* and in *Jerusalem* (it is striking how often Blake features the woman in the titles of his poems). Even when the Female Will is confused and stubborn, Blake accords it a remarkable poignancy and beauty, as here in *The Four Zoas*:

> And one Daughter of Los sat at the fiery Reel, & another
> Sat at the shining Loom with her Sisters attending round,
> Terrible their distress, & their sorrow cannot be utter'd:
> And another Daughter of Los sat at the Spinning Wheel,
> Endless their labour, with bitter food, void of sleep;
> Tho' hungry, they labour: they rouze themselves anxious
> Hour after hour labouring at the whirling Wheel,
> Many Wheels & as many lovely Daughters sit weeping.
> Yet the intoxicating delight that they take in their work
> Obliterates every other evil; none pities their tears,
> Yet they regard not pity & they expect no one to pity,
> For they labour for life & love regardless of any one
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But the poor Spectres that they work for always, incessantly.
They are mock'd by every one that passes by; they regard not,
They labour, & when their Wheels are broken by scorn & malice
They mend them sorrowing with many tears & afflictions.

(59,26-41)

We may note further that in *The Visions of the Daughters of Albion* there is poignancy and beauty and power in Oothoon's growth from an eager innocent to an independent thinker and critic of her fiance, her world, and its whole philosophical underpinning. The striking thing is that her defense against Theotormon and Bromion and their dogmatic/coercive ways couches itself in the ordinary: in larks, and eagles, wild asses and meek camels, lambs, and gardens, and then in the ways of memory and the concept of joy, problems of poverty and labor, the relation between youth and law, virginity and religion, and desire and love. If this is a rich array, so is the ordinary rich. And if Blake seems clamorous and hectic beside Jane Austen, it need not be from any radical aversion to the ordinary or the woman. It may be that he lacks her confidence, having her principles but lacking her genes. What he must strive to prophesy, she possesses in ordinary being.

ENDNOTES.


*Journals of Dorothy Wordsworth*, pp. 51-52. I italicize “she” to emphasize that here for the first time Dorothy acknowledges that the “dead person” is female.


We should note that *Vala* is treated as the title as the poem proceeds through its Nights.