

Reading Lucy, Rereading Nature

An Ecological Approach to

Wordsworth's Lucy Poems

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Abstract

William Wordsworth's Lucy poems, a series of intriguing meditations on a mysterious female figure, are an indelible part of the Romantic canon. The scholarly fervour to discover Lucy's real-life counterpart has often led critics to consider these works psychoanalytically or biographically. Rather than situate these works in such a context, my paper looks to see how we can consider the Lucy poems as ecological endeavours – specifically, to observe how Lucy is used to reread nature and develop a new understanding of the environment. Using the theories of Timothy Morton's "The Mesh" as my foundation, I argue that Wordsworth's Lucy poems are non-anthropocentric thought experiments that seek to decenter the human and further advocate the pantheism evident in his other nature poetry. Wordsworth accomplishes this by eroding several intellectual conventions: blurring the distinctions between life and non-life, human and animal; collapsing Lucy's linearity of being; and considering the role of perception and mediation in environmental assessment. By eschewing traditionally dualistic modes of representation that privilege human experience, Wordsworth embraces mesh-like thinking. He creates a space for ontological perspectives that disrupt the human-centric mode and remind us of our inextricability from nature – instituting new possibilities in conceiving of both Romantic canonicity and our place in the biosphere.

Keywords: Wordsworth, nature, Lucy poems, Anthropocene, ecology

When Pamela Woof asks, “Who was Lucy?” she eloquently captures the perennial allure to uncover who lies at the centre of William Wordsworth’s Lucy poems (28). She continues, “Did she have a basis in Annette Vallon, Margaret Hutchinson, Dorothy Wordsworth, Mary Hutchinson — was she all of these, someone else, no-one, a useful non-fiction?” (Woof 28). Such a quandary will undoubtedly continue to haunt readers and scholars, as it is impossible to determine who exactly served as the source for Lucy’s character. However, departing from such a question allows us to consider other valuable interpretations. Perhaps Lucy is not simply a departed lover, but Wordsworth’s catalyst to understand more intimately the nature that was so dear to him throughout his life. Thus, I intend to offer an alternative reading to these pieces – one that situates their purpose in an environmental-ecological framework. In particular, the Lucy poems function as emphatic thought experiments that attempt to display a confluence between human and nature. Read in the context of Timothy Morton’s “The Mesh,” I argue that these works represent Wordsworth’s quest to deepen the pantheistic spirit that he advocated in “Lines: Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey.” By blurring the distinctions between life and nonlife, human and nonhuman, disrupting linearity, and musing on the role of mediated experience, Wordsworth creates a non-anthropocentric¹ envisioning of Lucy that opens new perspectives on environmental consciousness in eighteenth-century nature poetry.

An indelible part of the Romantic canon, William Wordsworth’s Lucy poems have long been a source of intrigue for scholars of English literature. Historically, their analysis has often been overshadowed by attempts to identify the origin of their subject and psychoanalyze their writer. In “Wordsworth’s Lucy Poems in Psychobiographical Context,” Richard E. Matlak provides an examination of these works heavily rooted in “dispel[ling] the mystery of their genesis” (46). He attempts to understand their idiosyncrasies in light of two main themes: Wordsworth’s experiences with Dorothy at Goslar and his “vocational anxiety” at the time of their writing (Matlak 46). Specifically, he chronicles several instances of emotional turmoil during Wordsworth’s time in Germany – an uneasy relationship with Coleridge, an unfulfilling experience abroad, and an “ambivalence toward” his sister (Matlak 47). Though my analysis seeks to diverge from the heavily biographical approach Matlak employs, it is useful to note that he

chronicles Wordsworth's "rediscover[ies]" and "reassembl[y]" during this fraught period of his life (62). It is this reassembly of thought and consciousness that establishes my analysis – Wordsworth's Lucy poems provide us with a re-examination of environment, place, and ecology that demand to be recognized.

Nowhere is this ecological spirit better represented than the best known of the Lucy poems, "A slumber did my spirit seal." As Lucy's death is lamented, Wordsworth enacts a perpetuation of her existence through an organic exchange of life, directly contradicting this assertion of mortality his speaker iterates in the second stanza: "No motion has she now, no force; / She neither hears nor sees" (Wordsworth, Lines 5-6). While it is easy to locate Lucy's physical body in a perpetual state of *rigor mortis*, the final two lines explicitly undermine this assumption. When the speaker explains she is "[r]olled round in Earth's diurnal course" (7), the lack of motion and touch in the previous lines become counterpoints that reinforce Lucy's continued existence. She is *not* dead; Lucy is still alive, but has transformed to give life to and become the life of the plants and soil around her. Careful diction like "rolled round" and "diurnal" generate distinct moments of action that confound the immobility of her death. Similarly, Timothy Morton disrupts the boundaries between living and nonliving when he illuminates that "[t]racing the origins of life to a moment prior to life will result in paradoxes [...] the life-nonlife distinction is also untenable" (25). If the boundaries between living and nonliving are as permeable as Morton suggests, then does that not apply to Wordsworth's "A slumber"? Though Lucy's human existence has ended, she enters another kind of life – a new and unfathomed permutation of the "mesh" defined by her relationship with the elements of nature she has become (Morton 22). To Wordsworth, the human body and soul have a transformative capacity rooted in the laws of energy exchange; this is pantheism not in theory, but in practice. As such, the locus of Lucy is not in her individuality – it is saturated throughout a biological network of living things.

In "Three years she grew," Lucy undergoes a merger with a flower – the opening line, "Three years she grew in sun and shower" predicates itself on a nonhuman framework (Wordsworth, Line 1). Lucy both literally and metaphysically exists as a plant. Consequently, she needs sun and water to develop and reach the maturity of "stately height" later in the poem (32). Considered in the context of Morton's theories, the distinctions between organisms cease to exist here, and Lucy is not categorized by the limiting features of humanness. At the

poem's close, Wordsworth writes, "She died, and left to me / This heath, this calm, and quiet scene" (39-40). In this passage, Lucy bequeaths the natural-local spaces to her beloved, suggesting a bodily or intimate connection with them. Considering the construction of Lucy as Nature's "Child [... to] make / A Lady of [her] own" (4-6), this reading makes sense. I use Nature with a capital 'N' in these and subsequent instances to refer to the personified, archetypal mother-nature character Wordsworth employs in "Three years she grew." Accordingly, if we take Nature to be the voice and body of the Earth to which Wordsworth refers, Lucy is subsumed into its life-essence – therefore, she does not just leave these comforting scenes for her widower, but again becomes them. Nature is not only Lucy's "law and impulse" (8); her very being permeates through "rock and plain [...] earth and heaven, in glade and bower" (9-10). As Morton iterates, "Your DNA does not stop expressing itself at the ends of your fingers [...] The environment, then, from the perspective of the life sciences, is nothing but the phenotypical expression of DNA code" (26). Taken this way, Lucy does not die in the traditional sense. She lives across time and space. The prominent celestial imagery throughout the poems buttresses this idea. When Wordsworth refers to the "evening moon" (8), describes Lucy to be as "[f]air as a star" (8), or makes continual references to nighttime, "stars of midnight" (25), and "heaven" (10), he generates an expansiveness to Lucy that transcends her bodily limits and complicates her supposedly mortal, self-contained existence. Wordsworth, then, disrupts Lucy's linearity of being – her inseparable coexistence with the environment prompts readers to re-examine the self-other dichotomy commonly employed by anthropocentric perspectives on nature. Rather than live as an isolated, Cartesian subject, Lucy's permeability with her surroundings makes her dynamic, everlasting, and immortal.

Wordsworth's non-anthropocentric lens continues in "Strange fits of passion I have known," where the repeated references to the moon and "the orchard-plot" (Line 13) serve as referential tools that alert the speaker of his beloved's imminent presence. While features of the landscape like "the wide lea" (10) and "[t]hose paths so dear" (12) are topographical markers that remind him of his physical proximity to Lucy, her being is reflected in the almost behavioural impulses of the moon. When Wordsworth writes, "The sinking moon to Lucy's cot / Came near, and nearer still" (15-16), it is as if the cosmic body and Lucy begin to merge to elucidate the speaker's arrival. This feedback loop established between Lucy and her natural surroundings further supports her inseparability

from nature – the moon retains something of her existence even after her human form ceases to be. In “She dwelt among the untrodden ways,” Wordsworth describes Lucy as “[a] violet by a mossy stone / Half hidden from the eye” (5-6), suggesting that it takes a keen observer to notice the way she interacts with her environment. Because the speaker registers her presence, he can begin to parse out this way of living that decenters the human. For as Morton argues, “When Wordsworth is writing [... he] chooses forms [...] which will best unfold the openness he sees at the heart of experience” (28). This openness of perception leads us to a re-envisioning of nature founded on a nonhuman framework.

To further stress his ecological leanings, Wordsworth even goes so far as to entertain a biosemiotics-based communicative system – asserting that Lucy speaks in a non-linguistic, nonhuman manner. In “Three years she grew,” Wordsworth compares Lucy to a “fawn,” and proceeds to extend this analogy into a stanzaic conceit (13). It is necessary to note that the character Nature is speaking these lines – the aforementioned comparison of Lucy to a flower and the insistence that her “sportive” nature is deer-like opens up a space for the animal voice to permeate this poem (13). Later, Nature proclaims, “And hers shall be the breathing balm, / And hers the silence and the calm, / Of mute insensate things” (16-18). Here, Lucy’s human voice is silent – she does not possess a conventional method of vocalization. The “mute insensate things” are, presumably, the sounds and expressions of the land and its creatures; Lucy is able to embrace the semiotic address of geographical and animal signs and embrace a de-anthropomorphizing of perception (18). The use of the word “insensate” – referring to a kind of unconsciousness or anesthetization – directly connects this piece to “Lines: Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey.” When Wordsworth writes, “we are laid asleep / In body, and become a living soul” (Lines 45-46), he embraces a pantheism that also takes place in the Lucy poems, amounting to an altered state of consciousness. As Heesoon Bai explains in her review of *ch’i*, “All beings, whether vegetative, mineral, or animalistic, insofar as they are formed of and partake in the dynamic flow of *ch’i*, are animated, therefore, alive. If so, there is not a ‘thing’ that is not alive in this cosmos” (14). While this is not to suggest that Wordsworth was an avid reader or practitioner of Chinese and Japanese philosophies, it is a prescient parallel – in this case, he decenters the human to allow a dynamic energy exchange between all of earth’s objects and creatures. His pantheism, then, is one that allows readers to entertain signifiers and animal signs “as intrinsically discernable” (Menely 34).

Wordsworth builds on this idea in the fifth stanza of “Three Years She Grew,” strengthening Lucy’s semiotic sensitivity. As Nature expands,

[...] she shall lean her ear
 In many a secret place
 Where rivulets dance their wayward round,
 And beauty born of murmuring sound
 Shall pass into her face. (Lines 26-30)

It is clear that Lucy is able to hear what other humans cannot. Her sensitivity and oneness with nature enables her to register a “murmuring sound” that permeates through the world (29). While the anthropocentric subject might “fail to see” (or hear) it, she does not (21). Therefore, Lucy’s observatory powers espouse an even deeper connection with the elements of her environment. The “silent sympathy” that is imparted in “the Maiden’s form” is one for not only linguistic production but also the otherwise unnoticed expressions of animals, plants, insects, and other biological systems that do not speak in human ways (24, 23). This turn to environmental communication reflects what Jane Bennett’s “Political Ecologies” seeks to uncover: “[T]he relation between human and nonhuman actants” (98). While the Anthropos largely ignores the presence and power of these nonhuman actants – what Charles Darwin terms the “small agencies” of other biological creatures that effect systems-level, worldwide changes – Lucy embraces them (qtd. in Bennett 94). Thus, she acts as the key in adopting a symbiotic, bidirectional relationship between the human and nonhuman subject. Tobias Menely admits it is “difficult to maintain any categorical distinction between voice and speech, both of which signify” (23). The Lucy poems play to the epistemological uncertainty of this binary, collapsing such a division to give equal weight to the non-human voice. Read in light of the mesh, these poems disrupt Cartesian, dualistic modes of representation. When Morton states that “DNA has no species flavor,” he points to a radical decentering of human experience that is also present in the Lucy poems (27). As such, Wordsworth weakens and unravels what Jason Moore refers to as “the binary Nature/Society” to establish a new kind of ecological consciousness that presupposes the validity of biological and animal utterances (Moore 3; Menely 39).

To qualify further my analysis of the Lucy poems as an inherently ecological project, it is necessary to speak about Wordsworth's usage of perception and mediation in both these instances and in his writing as a whole. Wordsworth privileges the poet (as he does so in his preface to *Lyrical Ballads*) as a subject capable of entertaining and registering a heightened mode of perception. This perceptual sensitivity is what allows him to access a non-anthropocentric lens of environmental thought. In "She dwelt among the untrodden ways," Wordsworth uses the word "untrodden" to articulate a non-conventional method of seeing and being. Similar to the first lines of his pastoral poem "Michael," Wordsworth enacts an instructive rhetoric for his composition. At the beginning of "Michael," he proposes to his readers, "If from the public way you turn your steps / Up the tumultuous brook of Green-head Ghyll, [...] The pastoral mountains front you, face to face" (Lines 1-2, 5). Here, Wordsworth invites his reader to stray from what we might term the path most commonly travelled to witness a story about locality, bucolic life, and living-within-nature. While this version of Wordsworth's metanarrative direction is rather explicit, it operates analogously in "She dwelt," where he constructs Lucy as an elusive character. She is both "[h]alf hidden from the eye," and "live[s] unknown," (Wordsworth, Lines 6, 9). Upon her death, he admits that "few could know / When Lucy ceased to be" – but the poet *does* know, and despite Lucy's supposed inability to be discerned by the common subject, the speaker of this poem possesses a manner of refined observation that allowed him to find her (9-10). The poem's final, mournful refrain, "But she is in her grave, and, oh / The difference to me!" sees the poet lamenting the loss of something intrinsic to the world and its environment (11-12). With Lucy gone, Nature's offspring of "Three years she grew" rings somewhat hollow. A regular observer may not feel this difference, but Wordsworth's speaker experiences it acutely, and implicitly asks his readers to occupy that "untrodden" manner of seeing. As much as "She dwelt among the untrodden ways" is about Lucy's unconventionality, it is also about the speaker's ability to *notice* this unconventional method of being and communicate an imperative to his readers – predicating the environmental consciousness that runs through all of the Lucy poems. Timothy Morton argues that adopting the mesh "raises everything to the level of wonder" (27-28). If so, Wordsworth is working with a similar conception of experience. His environmental sensitivity is part of what enables him to access a non-anthropocentric *modus operandi*, filled with wonder and awe.

In his preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, William Wordsworth comments that the poet is “endued with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul” (299). It is evident that mediation and reflection are on Wordsworth’s mind – the poet is a figure whose capacity to ruminate on their own medium and communicate essential truths is one others do not possess. If this assessment holds true, then it is understandable how the act of poetry is able to open up new methods and avenues of perceiving the nebulous conceptual category we term ‘nature.’ In “Three years she grew,” Wordsworth’s retrospective consideration of Lucy’s life ends with an elegiac address, concluding, “She died, and left to me [...] The memory of what has been, / And never more will be” (Lines 39, 41-42). Remembrance and elegy are used as points of stop in a world filled with transience, change, and continual acceleration of time. When the speaker exclaims, “How soon my Lucy’s race was run!” he is attempting to locate a semblance of stasis to begin a new manner of interpreting his beloved’s life and her association with nature (38). As Jesse Oak Taylor argues, the elegiac form is pertinently ecological “because it both mediates the relationship between species and helps us conceptualize human existence in species terms” (225). The Lucy poems do memorialize the figure of Lucy, but they also act as powerful moments that consider the human form in a larger, species-environmental context that equalize the human and nonhuman. Therefore, the grieving process allows the poet to access a greater sense of loss that transcends the limits of mortality – to move beyond the individual life and capture a sense of species being, however evanescent. For Wordsworth, then, the poetic endeavour (in this case, the ballad-inflected elegy) is the vehicle for pausing and gathering an ecological awareness necessary for non-anthropocentric idea-making. Clearly, the literary mode is one perfect for considering questions of life and nonlife, linear and non-linear, human and animal, or society and environment. This is mediation in action.

Departing from a psychoanalytic or biographical interpretation of the Lucy poems opens up new pathways in conceiving of Romantic canonicity. Wordsworth’s series is as much an *ecological* endeavour as it is one of love or mourning. Through disrupting linearity, the boundaries between life and nonlife, the divide between human and nonhuman, and examining the effects of perception and mediated experience, he uses Lucy as a literal and literary catalyst to reread nature. Deepening the pantheism of his other nature poetry,

Wordsworth's pieces are non-anthropocentric thought experiments that disrupt dualistic approaches to ecological consciousness. As Wordsworth perpetuates mesh-like thinking in these works, the Lucy poems may lead us to a new, nonhuman understanding of our place in the biosphere.

Notes

1. In this paper, the phrase ‘non-anthropocentric’ refers to a mode of engaging with nature that embraces the central tenets of Timothy Morton’s “The Mesh.” In a non-anthropocentric environmental consciousness, humans relate to the biosphere in a symbiotic, integrative manner that does not privilege the human as an autocratic force outside of the natural domain, but an inextricable part of it.

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