

# Sussex Research

## Idle thought in Wordsworth's Lucy cycle

Richard Adelman

### Publication date

01-01-2011

### Licence

This work is made available under the **Copyright not evaluated** licence and should only be used in accordance with that licence. For more information on the specific terms, consult the repository record for this item.

### Citation for this work (American Psychological Association 7th edition)

Adelman, R. (2011). *Idle thought in Wordsworth's Lucy cycle* (Version 1). University of Sussex.  
<https://hdl.handle.net/10779/uos.23388011.v1>

### Published in

Romanticism

### Link to external publisher version

<https://doi.org/10.3366/rom.2011.0009>

### Copyright and reuse:

This work was downloaded from Sussex Research Open (SRO). This document is made available in line with publisher policy and may differ from the published version. Please cite the published version where possible. Copyright and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners unless otherwise stated. For more information on this work, SRO or to report an issue, you can contact the repository administrators at [sro@sussex.ac.uk](mailto:sro@sussex.ac.uk). Discover more of the University's research at <https://sussex.figshare.com/>

## Idle thought in Wordsworth's Lucy cycle

Article (Unspecified)

Adelman, Richard (2011) Idle thought in Wordsworth's Lucy cycle. *Romanticism*, 17 (1). pp. 94-105. ISSN 1354-991X

This version is available from Sussex Research Online: <http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/id/eprint/40678/>

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies and may differ from the published version or from the version of record. If you wish to cite this item you are advised to consult the publisher's version. Please see the URL above for details on accessing the published version.

### **Copyright and reuse:**

Sussex Research Online is a digital repository of the research output of the University.

Copyright and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable, the material made available in SRO has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

## Idle Thought in Wordsworth's Lucy Cycle

**Keywords:** Wordsworth, idleness, sleep, Cowper, reverie

Laugh ye, who boast your more mercurial  
powers,  
That never feel a stupor, know no pause,  
Nor need one; I am conscious, and  
confess,  
Fearless, a soul that does not always  
think.

(William Cowper, *The Task*<sup>1</sup>)

Strange fits of passion have I known:  
And I will dare to tell,  
But in the Lover's ear alone,  
What once to me befell.

(William Wordsworth, 'Strange  
fits of passion'<sup>2</sup>)

William Cowper's 'fearless' 'confession' is situated, in *The Task* (1784), as an introduction to the free operations of the fancy that make up the poem's influential 'brown study' episode. Having 'a soul that does not always think' serves, in the passage that follows, not as an inhibition so much as an opportunity for the poet's mind to do much more than think. The 'ludicrous and wild' conjurings and imaginings, a 'waking dream' of 'strange visages' (*Task*, IV. 286–8) and other objects inspired by the movements of the poet's fire, hold a position of intense creativity in the poem, offering a model of activity more powerful and more interesting

than the abundance of rural 'tasks' that punctuate Cowper's narrative. The speaker of Wordsworth's 'Strange fits of passion' (1800) might be described in similar terms. Daring to disclose a style of thought distinct from everyday understanding, the narrator of the poem uses this confession in order to lead into an account of a mental experience both 'ludicrous' and resonant. The selection of the term 'fits', to the reader who has read both poems, recalls the language with which Cowper connects his fire and his state of mind, the former casting its 'shadow to the ceiling' and 'there by fits / Dancing uncouthly to the quivering flame' (*Task*, IV. 285–6). Cowper's 'waking dream', and his later classification of the experience of the brown study as taking place during the understanding's 'sleep' (*Task*, IV. 298), also anticipates Wordsworth's narrator's description of such an experience as 'one of those sweet dreams', 'Kind Nature's gentlest boon' ('Strange fits', 17 & 18). And beyond such similarities of the language in which these two episodes proceed, it is also worth pointing out the ambivalence with which both texts deal with such experiences. Not only is Cowper problematically 'restore[d]' to himself at the scene's close, that event's fragility being signalled by the image of fancy's 'glassy threads' being 'snapp[ed] short' (*Task*, IV. 305–7), but the tone of the scene is also instigated by its 'pendulous and foreboding' fire (*Task*, IV. 293) and the patterns it generates. It

is the 'gloom' (*Task*, IV. 278) of this fitful dumb show, marvellously strange but at the same time disturbingly alien (the meanings most strongly invoked by the adverb 'uncouthly'), that matches and 'suits' (*Task*, IV. 279) the poet's mind, ebbing and flowing with the fantastical and the unfamiliar. Wordsworth's version of such reticence can be seen throughout the poem in his various spoofs of the quest motif,<sup>3</sup> as well as in the poem's opening stanza. The formal boast of daring to tell of such 'fits of passion' is immediately qualified in the speaker's third line. It is only 'the Lover' that can be permitted to hear this confession, even though such a stipulation barely limits the speaker's audience. The failure of, but need for, this qualification sets the tone for the manner in which the narrator's 'strange fits' will be subtly ironized in the poem. As in Cowper's brown study, strangeness seems to function as a description of radical individuality at the same time as threatening to tip over into comic bathos.

The linguistic and rhetorical similarities between Cowper's influential description of idle thought and the terms of the first poem in Wordsworth's Lucy cycle offer not so much a story of influence, as a starting point for a reading of Wordsworth's activities in these poems subtly distinct from current appreciations of them. This is not to say that recent scholarly work on the Lucy cycle lacks variety. On the contrary, the factual problems of even dealing with the five texts as a cycle, the locations at which and social contexts in which the poems were written, the tentative first interpretation Coleridge places on them, Wordsworth's own 1815 distinctions between poems 'founded on the Affections' and 'of the Imagination', a distinction which splits the series down the middle, not to mention the work that the poet seems to be doing with the poems' various interconnections and resonances, all mean that recent criticism comes at the texts from a spectrum of contexts and

positions. Richard Matlak's focus on the poems' 'psychobiographical context' as the key to unlocking them and the identity of Lucy, Frances Ferguson's exploration of the cycle's parody of medieval quest romance, Brian Caraher's detailed analysis of linguistic ambiguity in 'A slumber did my spirit seal' and beyond, represent just some of these various possibilities.<sup>4</sup>

The reading that I intend to construct here draws on many of these approaches at the same time as attempting to achieve something slightly different from them. I intend to use Cowper's serio-comic association of idle thought with sleep as a way into reading two of Wordsworth's Lucy poems as also concerned with the parameters and significances of this type of contemplation. These two poems are 'Strange fits of passion' and 'A slumber did my spirit seal', both of which are written in what Matlak describes as the first phase of Lucy composition — taking place in Goslar in 1798–9, in the first three months after the Wordsworths' separation from Coleridge — and both of which first appear in the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* in 1800. This will not be to claim, importantly, that Wordsworth's Lucy poems belong to the tradition of thought that responds directly, and that alludes overtly, to Cowper's brown study (as Mary Wollstonecraft's *Scandinavian Letters* and Samuel Taylor Coleridge's 'Frost at Midnight' do, for example<sup>5</sup>). Rather, this paper contends that Cowper, and indeed Coleridge, can be used to draw out the manner in which Wordsworth is concerned, in this series of poems, with a similar idea. That idea is that idle thought, aligned in Cowper and Coleridge with the mood that generates poetic composition, is at once creative and disturbing, both 'ludicrous and wild'.<sup>6</sup> Rather than picking out a pattern of allusions to Cowper, then, as it is possible to do with Wollstonecraft or with Coleridge, this paper will seek only to read Wordsworth's Lucy-thought alongside Cowper's brown study

and its responses. Neither will this be an attempt to claim that Cowper's brown study, or even Coleridge's reaction to it, are specifically in Wordsworth's mind in late 1798. It is the contention of this paper, rather, that these texts share a distinct set of concerns about idle thought and its attendant mood of poetic composition. Those concerns have already been hinted at by my opening quotations, and they will be explored in more detail below.

Let us begin with a more thorough analysis of 'Strange fits of passion', for it is in this poem that the parameters in which Wordsworth is operating are most clearly visible. Following his excellent analysis of 'A slumber did my spirit seal', Brian Caraher offers the following description of the last stages of the plot of 'Strange fits':

[B]ecause the speaker is ascending a hill the moon will appear to him to drop much faster until it is quickly blocked from view behind the roof of the cottage. Since the speaker, apparently, is not very far from the cottage [...] the roof will appear large enough to accomplish this optical delusion. The speaker's own physical movement toward the house of his beloved, then, causes the moon to drop abruptly out of sight. As a consequence, the speaker's own effort leaves him lightless in the night shade cast by Lucy's roof and fitful with the strange passion that befalls him there.<sup>7</sup>

This account of the poem occurs in a passage in which Caraher is using Erasmus Darwin's *Zoönomia* to read Wordsworth's narrator as 'delusional', hence his description of the moon's movement as an 'optical delusion'. The strange fit of passion considered by the poem is most importantly empirically false for Caraher, its narrator 'prone to mental delusion' (Wordsworth's 'Slumber', 112). What is most intriguing in this description, however, is not the negativity with which Caraher views the

events of the poem, but the precise timing he assigns to the fit in question. Seeing it as caused by the 'triangulation' (Wordsworth's 'Slumber', 114) of the poem's speaker in relation to the moon and his beloved, Caraher has the narrator prone to 'fitful' passion only after his own movement 'leaves him lightless'. It is apparent, from this observation, that the 'passion' in question for Caraher is that contained in the poem's final two lines: "'O mercy" to myself I cried, / "If Lucy should be dead!"' ('Strange fits', 27–8). The poem begins, in this view, by introducing the idea of a 'fit of passion' and ends the moment such passion is voiced, in its published form at least.<sup>8</sup> Cowper's association of the 'fitful' mental experience with the language of sleep offers the possibility of approaching things slightly differently, however.

Turning back to the poem in question, I want to pay attention to the timings of its slender plot. Here are its last four stanzas in their final form:

And now we reached the orchard-plot;  
And, as we climbed the hill,  
The sinking moon to Lucy's cot  
Came, near, and nearer still.

In one of those sweet dreams I slept,  
Kind Nature's gentlest boon!  
And all the while my eyes I kept  
On the descending moon.

My horse moved on; hoof after hoof  
He raised, and never stopped:  
When down behind the cottage roof,  
At once, the bright moon dropped.

What fond and wayward thoughts will slide  
Into a Lover's head!  
"O mercy!" to myself I cried,  
"If Lucy should be dead!"

('Strange fits', 13–28)

At the beginning of the second stanza of this quotation, the poem's fifth, the narrator describes his state of mind as that of a 'sweet

dream'. But one should observe, here, that this waking sleep is not definitively described as beginning at this point. The narrator does not say that it was as he 'climbed the hill' that he 'fell' asleep, or into such a state. Rather, the association of the waking sleep with 'the descending moon' raises the possibility that this reverie or trance might have begun in the poem's third stanza, where the speaker 'fixed' his 'eye' '[u]pon the moon' ('Strange fits', 9). Either way, if we are to follow Cowper and associate the 'strange fit' in question with that experience indicated by the language of sleep, we should note that this experience fills more of the poem's action than simply its final two lines.

There is further evidence for taking the waking sleep to be the main referent of this poem, its 'strange fit', rather than simply the housing of its final passion. Take the curious inclusion of the narrator's horse in his description of the pair's movement at the beginning of the poem's fourth stanza: 'And now *we* reached the orchard-plot; / And as *we* climbed the hill'. Functionally, this device allows Wordsworth to characterize the narrator's sleep as both a withdrawal from sympathy with his companion and a paradoxical inertia within overall movement. Both effects are generated by the contrast of this inclusive terminology in the poem's fourth stanza with that of its sixth, immediately following the description of the narrator's dreaming state. There, that the speaker's horse 'move[s] on', 'He' not 'we' raising 'hoof after hoof', characterizes the speaker's state as one of aloneness. Further, that such movement on the animal's part 'never stopped' implies that the speaker, now detached from this process pronominally, is also detached from it physically. Such careful use of language at this moment amounts to this occurrence of 'one of those sweet dreams' representing a kind of solipsistic stillness over and above the company and movement foregrounded by the poem.

Caraher's location of the 'passion' in the poem common-sensically attributed it to the speaker's only spoken utterance in his plot. We can now summarise the poem slightly differently. The association of the fit with the language of sleep instigated by the comparison with Cowper, allows us to characterize more of the poem's action as corresponding to the idea of a 'strange fit of passion'. Doing so, furthermore, enables us to be more positive with the waking state characterized by the poem. Consider, for example, the first exclamatory sentence of the poem's final stanza: 'What fond and wayward thoughts will slide / Into a Lover's head!' Building on Frances Ferguson's cogent analysis of the quest motif in the Lucy cycle, Caraher observes the various connotations attached to Wordsworth's deployment of the adjective 'fond' here. Given the poem's repeated reference to Chaucer's 'Tale of Sir Thopas', alongside evidence of Bishop Percy's 'brief essay on the word "fit"' in his *Reliques of Ancient Poetry*, bought by the Wordsworths shortly before their departure for Goslar, Caraher contends that —

The speaker's thoughts can be tender and affectionate in their waywardness; or they can be contrived, devised, or invented, as a rhymers would contrive tender and adventurous thoughts in comprising a fit. "Fond," for Chaucer, could mean foolish or foolishly tender or could be the past participle of "finden", the Middle English form of the verb "to find", which also includes the sense of "to devise" or "to invent".

(Wordsworth's 'Slumber', 107)

Let us look, in the light of these observations, at the tone of the sentence 'What fond and wayward thoughts will slide / Into a Lover's head!' The first thing to notice is that, in accordance with the mood of perceptive detachment figured in Wordsworth's characterisation of his narrator's 'sweet dream',

the tone of this line is not one of passion, in the sense in which Caraher applies that term to the poem's final exclamation. Rather, the speaker of the poem seems to be knowingly and retrospectively treating the 'sliding' of such 'thoughts' into his head with equanimity. Secondly, if in this context the word 'fond' carries connotations of contrivance and poetic invention in conjunction with its tender overtones, then the mental state being depicted here, the waking sleep, seems to move very close to a state of poetic creativity. The tone of equanimity, representing thoughts 'tender and affectionate in their waywardness', would seem to derive from the positive overtones of such creativity. That this waking sleep is indeed 'Kind Nature's gentlest boon' is thus depicted by the subtle play of positivity and mischievousness in the 'sliding' of 'fond and wayward thoughts' into the speaker's head.

These connotations, importantly, allow another context to be brought to bear on this first Lucy poem, alongside and in conjunction with Wordsworth's medieval reading. Carrying connotations of creativity and playful mischievousness, the speaker's reverie of death is an experience in which a 'strange fit' generates a 'passion'. Strikingly, to the reader considering this poem's first published appearance in the *Lyrical Ballads*, such a description seems to recall the 1802 'Preface' to those volumes, and its portrait of the composition of poetry. This is Wordsworth's delineation of that process, occurring in the wake of his repetition of the phrase 'the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings':

I have said that Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity: the emotion is contemplated till by a species of reaction the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and

does itself actually exist in the mind. In this mood successful composition generally begins, and in a mood similar to this it is carried on;<sup>9</sup>

Both here and in 'Strange fits', Wordsworth foregrounds a movement from 'tranquillity' to 'emotion', the latter engendered by the former. In the act described by the 'Preface' this transition is so practised as to almost be premeditated. In the poem, by contrast, such a transformation takes place involuntarily and thus troublingly. Further, while the 'Preface' gives the case of a specific 'emotion' being 'recollected', the poetic act producing a 'kindred' emotion in the poet's mind, 'Strange fits' contains no such specificity. The strangeness of the experience being depicted there, its disturbing overtones, seem to be connected to its speaker's lack of control over, or focus on, his own emotion. It does not seem to be a stretch in this context to describe the poem as depicting something very similar to, but importantly distinct from, the poetic act as Wordsworth describes it. The reason this passion is denominated a *strange* fit seems to have to do with both its involuntary genesis and its deathly content. The manner in which the passion under consideration is described as 'slid[ing]' into the speaker's head, and the connotations of the word 'wayward', can now be seen to carry such troubling overtones. That sentence's tone of equanimity might now be characterized as something akin to stilted ambivalence. The waking sleep here would seem to be contemplation out of control, poetic creativity that is not a voluntary act, but a kind of seizure. The phrase a 'strange fit of passion' would seem to characterize more than simply the speaker's feeling after 'the bright moon' has 'dropped', in other words. The event referred to by the poem's first line is the 'sweet dream' itself, with all its detachments from everyday movement, all its apparent poise, and all its consequent forebodings.

Now that we have observed this subtle connection between idle thought and poetic creativity in 'Strange fits', it is also worth noting that this is a connection made by both Cowper and Coleridge in the years leading up to the composition of the Lucy poems. *The Task*, for instance, aligns a series of moments of idle thought along the lines of the terminology we have already witnessed in the brown study. Idle thought is at once passive and active, akin to sleep but also wildly creative. And, importantly, these parameters are set down first, in Cowper's long poem, in an account of poetic creation that occurs in Book II, 'The Time-Piece'. There, the poet's task is depicted as paradoxically work and not work, both pleasurable and taxing, comprising 'dangers' and 'escapes', but 'pleasing' when considered at a distance (*Task*, II. 309 & 299). It is this history of idle thought in the poem that lies behind the creative overtones of the brown study's reverie, the second key moment at which Cowper explores such territory. In that scene, therefore, the ability of the poet to conjure a 'waking dream' of 'houses, towers, / Trees, churches, and strange visages' (*Task*, IV. 287–8) bears an important relation to composition itself. Idle thought leads, almost involuntarily, to poetic creativity.<sup>10</sup>

It is also possible to trace a similar connection between idle thought and poetic creativity in Coleridge's writing. In the poem that becomes 'The Eolian Harp', for instance, the reverie instigated by the poet's carefully positioned idleness is one concerning poetic inspiration directly:

And what if all of animated nature  
Be but organic Harps diversly fram'd,  
That tremble into thought, as o'er them  
sweeps,  
Plastic and vast, one intellectual Breeze,  
At once the Soul of each, and God of  
all?

(*'Effusion XXXV'*, 36–40<sup>11</sup>)

This thought, arising from a position of idle contemplation, reconsiders what it means both to think and to compose. And importantly, these two activities, poetic creativity and contemplation in general terms, are aligned as stemming from the exact same impulse, in this tentative suggestion. Man, the poet, and indeed 'all of animated nature' might 'tremble into thought' for the same reason. They are only to be distinguished by the manner in which they are 'fram'd'. It should also be noted, as we shall see below, that this poem subsequently confers physically dangerous connotations on this 'intellectual Breeze' in much the same way that the brown study's creativity also contains 'dangers' that must be 'escaped'.

What these examples point to, therefore, is not that 'Strange fits' functions by direct reference to the writing of Coleridge or of Cowper, but that Wordsworth's poem is animated by a very similar set of concerns. Idle thought, for all three poets at this moment, represents an activity poised between creativity and danger, and between pleasure and pain. 'Kind Nature's gentlest boon', to use Wordsworth's terms, is also 'wayward', and is inclined, on the evidence of 'Strange fits' and Cowper's brown study, to invoke the idea of death at the very moment it is most 'sweet'.

It is with this shared subject matter in mind, and its tension between creativity and the idea of death, that I want to turn to the third Lucy poem in their 1800 ordering, 'A slumber did my spirit seal'. Because this pattern of ideas, equating sleep, idle thought, and mental disturbance, is also of central importance there. Here is the two stanza poem in its entirety:

A slumber did my spirit seal;  
I had no human fears:  
She seemed a thing that could not feel  
The touch of earthly years.  
No motion has she now, no force;  
She neither hears nor sees;



Rolled round in earth's diurnal course,  
 With rocks, and stones, and trees.  
 ('A slumber', 1-8)

At a first glance, the 'slumber' in question in this poem might appear to be distinct from the waking sleep explored in 'Strange fits'. The discrepancy revolves around the verb to 'seal' in the poem's first line. Although the speaker of 'Strange fits' floats between experience and reflection, between writing about, and writing from within, a 'fit of passion', that poem does not function along the lines of the type of self-reflection found in Cowper's brown study. There, in the brown study, the poet is detached enough from the experience he is depicting to describe the interplay of those of his faculties under consideration. It is the 'sleep' of the poet's 'understanding' (*Task*, IV. 296), for instance, that is characterized by his 'Fancy' being 'soothed' (*Task*, IV. 286) by the 'waking dream'. In the first line of 'A Slumber', however, the presence of the speaker's 'spirit' achieves something like this register of description. It is now the speaker's 'spirit' that is under the spell of a waking sleep, rather than the poem's narrator considered as a whole. And further, the relationship between the speaker's spirit and the 'slumber' is now classified as one of 'sealing'.

It is my contention that it is by reading 'A slumber' alongside Cowper's brown study episode that the nature of this 'sealing', and the import of the type of analysis this poem attempts, can be seen most clearly. Again, this is not to say that this poem functions exclusively by reference to Cowper, but that its concern for a similar problem, or tension, in idle thought renders it apt to such a treatment. Let us turn back briefly to the brown study, then, and to the lines that conclude that episode:

'Tis thus the understanding takes repose  
 In indolent vacuity of thought,  
 And sleeps and is refresh'd. Meanwhile  
 the face

Conceals the mood lethargic with a mask  
 Of deep deliberation, as the man  
 Were task'd to his full strength, absorb'd  
 and lost.

Thus oft reclin'd at ease, I lose an hour  
 At evening, till at length the freezing  
 blast

That sweeps the bolted shutter,  
 summons home

The recollected powers, and snapping  
 short

The glassy threads with which the fancy  
 weaves

Her brittle toys, restores me to myself.

(*Task*, IV. 296-307)

There are several elements of this passage that are pertinent to reading 'A slumber'. One should note, most prominently, that Cowper's classification of the fancy's 'wild' imaginings as taking place while the 'understanding' 'sleeps' is equated, chronologically and physically in these lines, with the appearance of a 'mask' of 'deep deliberation'. The suspension of the understanding's activities thus corresponds to a kind of fixed posture that separates internal activity from outward interaction. The mask replaces normal interactions with the world with a rigid appearance of 'absorption'. Secondly, the process underneath this mask is represented in these lines as a troubling alienation from the world, and from the self. The effect of this is that phrases such as 'ludicrous and wild', and the fitful and 'foreboding' movements of the poet's fire, take on more solidly dangerous connotations when the episode's reverie ends with the poet being 'restored' to himself. Further, these lines also serve to classify this excursion out of the self that has taken place in the episode so far as troublingly fragile: the 'glassy threads' that led to 'brittle toys' turn out to 'snap' as soon as the physicality of the world, the 'freezing blast', penetrates the poet's mask. The whole episode is rendered both insubstantial and dangerously

physical by these lines, therefore. And it is this perspective that also allows the final element of these lines to be drawn out. Since the brown study episode is founded on the shared physicality between the movements of the poet's fire and the operations of his 'fancy', what takes place in these lines classifies that relationship as allowing the individual to enter a world a dangerous physicality. As in Coleridge and Wollstonecraft's versions of this process, ceasing to control one's mind consciously leads to an encounter with something shifting, shadowy, and sublimely powerful that surrounds the individual in moments of reverie. In Cowper's brown study, allowing the understanding to sleep is thus equated with a dangerous engagement with the 'uncouth', 'pendulous', and 'foreboding' physicality of the scene's fire. All this takes place at the expense of normal understanding of, and normal interaction with, the world.

This paradigm, of idle thought leading to an encounter with a world of dangerous physicality that threatens to subsume the individual's identity, is shared between Cowper, Coleridge, and Wollstonecraft, in this period. And it is this paradigm that is also explored, but in an original way, I suggest, by Wordsworth's 'A slumber did my spirit seal'. Let us return to the poem now. If we equate the 'slumber' of the poem's first line with the reverie of idle thought that is depicted by the language of sleep in 'Strange fits' and in the brown study, then the process taking place at the beginning of Wordsworth's poem seems to correspond to Cowper's delineation. Where Cowper's mask sealed and insulated him from the world of the understanding, this 'slumber' has the same effect, isolating the poem's speaker, and his 'spirit', from usual interaction with the world. This relationship is made evident by the poem's second line, for having 'no human fears' corresponds to the kind of engagement with the world of shadowy physicality that the brown

study depicts. The waking sleep, the contemplative idle reverie in which one disengages one's understanding to explore a different world, represents a 'sealing' of the 'spirit' from that world. It is in such reverie, according to the first lines of 'A slumber', that one can encounter the idea of death without 'human fear', even though that encounter led to the reverie's conclusion in 'Strange fits'.

The second element that I picked out of Cowper's conclusion to the brown study episode is also to be traced in 'A slumber'. First, however, I must note that I am considering 'A slumber' in the light of Brian Caraher's masterful treatment of the poem's syntax, in which he demonstrates that the pronoun 'She' in its third line equates more directly to the poet's 'spirit' than it does to the enigmatic figure of Lucy herself, despite this poem's position in the Lucy cycle.<sup>12</sup> So, as the brown study depicted the poet's alienation from the normal physicality of the world, so do the third and fourth lines of 'A slumber', when one follows Caraher. 'She', the speaker's spirit, 'seemed', in this waking sleep, to belong in a realm untouched by 'earthly' concerns. In much the same way, at the height of Cowper's reverie, it is only the dramatic interaction of the 'freezing blast' and the 'bolted shutter' that can rouse the poet from his contemplation. The speaker's detachment from the movement of his horse in 'Strange fits' fulfils a similar function. The 'touch of earthly years', the physicality of worldly concerns, is suspended by the alienation of the idle reverie.

Following the paradigm of Cowper's thought in this manner becomes most useful, however, when one considers the final four lines of Wordsworth's 'A slumber', for that is where this process enables us to see Wordsworth's originality, in comparison to Cowper, Coleridge, or Wollstonecraft's treatment of this idea. We have already seen, in the brown study, that the experience of alienation from the self, and the suspension of understanding's

interaction with the world, takes place at the same time as a heightened experience of the physicality of one key object. In the brown study, and in Coleridge's recreation of that scene in 'Frost at Midnight' (1798), this is the object that instigates the poet's reverie — the fire. In Wollstonecraft's *Scandinavian Letters*, heightened experiences of a series of natural objects are explored, that cast the traveller's thought away from herself on fancy's 'glassy threads'.<sup>13</sup> In all these cases, the physicality of that object carries disturbing overtones, and threatens, importantly, to reconstitute the individual concerned in its own shifting image. In the brown study, this danger takes the form of the fitful, uncouth, pendulous movements of the poet's fire. In the 'Eolian Harp', it is the notion that the 'intellectual Breeze' might actually become a 'wild', 'various', and 'random' 'gale' ('Effusion XXXV', 34), given mastery over the poet's mind when he disengages his understanding.

What is unique about 'A slumber', in the context of these treatments of idle thought, is that its events take place without attachment to a single physical object. Whereas in 'Strange fits', it is the 'evening-moon' ('Strange fits', 8), or the scene more generally, that seems to throw the poem's speaker into reverie, in 'A slumber' the whole process, although similar in design, takes place in a more abstracted, undefined sphere. The poem's 'slumber' is not just 'uncall'd' ('Effusion XXXV', 31) and involuntary, therefore, but unprompted. It is nevertheless the case that, as in Cowper and Coleridge, the problematic nature of this type of idle thought is depicted, in 'A slumber', by dangerous interaction with physicality that takes place in the poem's second stanza. There as well, however, Wordsworth has opened up the problematic connection with objects of reverie in a more universal manner. No longer using a single fire or the idea of a gale to represent the problem of idle thought, the reverie of 'A slumber' equates this danger to

'earth's diurnal course' itself, and to objects considered generically. The speaker's spirit, now motionless as in the riding passage of 'Strange fits', and so cut off from normal sensory understanding that it 'neither hears nor sees', experiences instead the cold eternality of the movements of symbolic inanimate objects, of 'rocks, and stones, and trees'. Where Cowper and Coleridge portrayed the possibility of redefinition in the image of one object, 'A slumber' considers redefinition by death, therefore. The connotations of idle thought that were held in check as troubling, uncouth, or frighteningly wild, as a particular problem of one class of object, by Cowper and Coleridge, are unleashed wholesale, by 'A slumber'.

A reverie on the idea of an 'intellectual Breeze', or on the idea of the fitful movement of flames, is rendered a reverie on the idea of death itself, by Wordsworth. And the effect of this reframing of Cowper's paradigm of idle thought, is that 'A slumber' plumbs greater depths of thought than the brown study or Coleridge's versions of that scene.

Wordsworth's idle reverie passes beyond specific physical danger to categorically invoke death, and burial, as a physical reality. What was localised and therefore containable in Cowper and Coleridge, is rendered conceptual and universal by Wordsworth.

There is one further manner in which 'A slumber' must be understood to represent a different degree of attention to the problem of idle thought than any of its equivalent accounts in the writing of Coleridge or Cowper. That is in terms of its consistency of tone. Reading 'A slumber' in terms of the paradigm of thought to be found in Cowper's brown study, makes clear that the two accounts of idle thought differ significantly in terms of irony.<sup>14</sup> Consider, for example, the connotations of Cowper's image of the 'mask of deep deliberation'. That mask functions, in the brown study, both to describe the withdrawal of

the poet's understanding from the world, and to portray that process, mockingly, as one of deception. It is *as if* the poet were 'task'd to his full strength, absorb'd and lost', as if he were engaged in some serious occupation, the implication being that idle thought could not be considered to engage the individual completely. The sealing of the speaker's spirit that takes place in 'A slumber', by contrast, carries no such possibility of flippancy. Wordsworth does not draw back from the deathly connotations of idle thought, in that poem, as Cowper does by means of such carefully sustained irony. And it is important to note that across Coleridge's various treatments of this model of idle thought, such irony is also consistently deployed. In the 'Eolian Harp' poem, for instance, ironic disavowal is achieved by the presence of the poet's wife, Sara, who is used to voice an instant repost to the reverie's possibilities: Sara's 'more serious eye' 'darts' an instant 'reproof' along the lines of the poet's blasphemy ('Effusion XXXV', 41–2). The transcendent possibilities of the idle reverie are thus transformed, by this poem's action, into the 'shapings of an unregenerate mind', 'Bubbles that glitter as they rise and break / On vain Philosophy's aye-babbling spring' ('Effusion XXXV', 47–9). One should also note, in this connection, that Wordsworth's 'Strange fits' dramatises a similarly ironic withdrawal from the concerns of its speaker's reverie. Not only is this achieved by the playful undermining of its speaker in the poem's first stanza that we have already noted, but also, in the unpublished final stanza, the reverie's content itself becomes the object of laughter:

I told her this: her laughter light  
Is ringing in my ears:  
And when I think upon that night  
My eyes are dim with tears.<sup>15</sup>

These lines continue the poem's serio-comic tone, balancing humour and earnestness. The speaker's tears are definitively aligned to

neither Lucy's laughter nor the speaker's own deathly premonition. The possibility that the poem's fit of passion might be a matter for serious concern is maintained, even though that fit is also thoroughly undermined.

Turning back to 'A slumber', therefore, one finds a striking difference in tone, in comparison to these examples of Cowper and Coleridge's thought, as well as of Wordsworth's own. In 'A slumber' the reverie, and its thorough sealing of the speaker's spirit from any ironic detachment, is given regular metrical assurance. The first and third lines' unbroken iambic tetrameter and precise rhyme achieve this directness of purpose. And without playful commentary, ironic coda, or dramatic counter-voice, the constant features of Cowper and Coleridge's treatment of troubling idle thought, 'A slumber' proceeds with conviction in the spiritual seriousness of its reverie. The effect of this departure from irony and humour is to cast 'A slumber' into a realm of philosophical gravity that is deliberately avoided by every other example of the idle reverie we have considered. 'A slumber' thus stands out, in the context of this period's thought, for its simultaneously formal and thematic assurance. In seemingly calm disinterestedness, it takes the analysis of idle thought it shares with Cowper and Coleridge beyond those poets' diverse concerns for that activity's validity.<sup>16</sup>

I want to conclude by making a couple of observations about the analysis of Wordsworth's Lucy-thought made possible by simultaneous attention to Cowper's brown study and to Coleridge and Wollstonecraft's meditations on that scene. Firstly, and importantly, using Cowper as a heuristic device in this manner makes it possible to follow Brian Caraher's excellent analysis of the linguistics of 'A slumber did my spirit seal' and emancipate that poem from its problematic connection to the figure of Lucy herself. A reading that

follows Cowper and Coleridge in their concern for the parameters of idle thought renders the shared subject matter of 'Strange fits' and 'A slumber' that category itself, rather than the protean figure of Lucy. Moreover, were there space here to offer treatments of the three remaining poems in the Lucy cycle, it is my belief that it could be demonstrated that the figure of Lucy in Wordsworth's Lucy-thought is rendered a kind of shorthand for the problematic nature of idle thought itself. This is to say that Cowper's brown study also opens up ways of reading 'She dwelt among untrodden ways', 'I travelled among unknown men', and 'Three years she grew' along similar lines to the readings of 'Strange fits' and 'A slumber' I have offered here. The notion of the fire's movement, in the brown study, invoking 'some stranger's near approach' (*Task*, IV. 295), which is explored at even greater length in Coleridge's 'Frost at Midnight', could be the starting point for an analysis of the idea of 'strangeness' and the 'stranger' in 'She dwelt', for instance. Likewise, the notion of the involuntary genesis of this style of idle thought, in Cowper and in Coleridge, seems to bear an important relation to the idea of enslavement by nature-contemplation, and by Lucy-thought, in 'Three years she grew' and 'I travelled'.<sup>17</sup> It is my assertion that, by these analyses, Wordsworth's conversation with Cowper and Coleridge on this subject could be opened up even further. And it is my contention that the consideration of Cowper's brown study alongside Wordsworth's writing allows us to witness such a conversation taking place concerning the problematic nature of idle thought in 'Strange fits' and 'A slumber'. When the details of this conversation are charted, furthermore, Wordsworth's significant departure from the repeated reticence and irony that Cowper and Coleridge infuse into their depictions of idle thought becomes clear. 'A slumber did my spirit seal' thus represents an examination of the dangers of idle thought

in terms uniquely emancipated from the local, the particular, and the ironic.

#### NOTES

1. W. Cowper, *The Task, and Selected Other Poems*, ed. J. Sambrook (4 vols, London, 1994), iv. 282–5. Hereafter *Task*.
2. W. Wordsworth, *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. E. de Selincourt and H. Darbishire (5 vols, Oxford, 1940–9), ii. 29, lines 1–4. Quotations from the Lucy poems will hereafter be referred to by their conventional titles, and can be found in *The Poetical Works*, ii. 29–31, and 214–16.
3. See Frances Ferguson, 'The Lucy Poems: Wordsworth's Quest for a Poetic Object', *ELH*, 40. 4 (Winter 1973), 532–48.
4. Richard Matlak, 'Wordsworth's Lucy Poems in Psychobiographical Context', *PMLA*, 93. 1 (January 1978), 46–65; Brian Caraher, *Wordsworth's 'Slumber' and the Problematics of Reading* (Pennsylvania, 1991).
5. See Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'Frost at Midnight', *Poetical Works*, ed. J. C. C. Mays, Bollingen Collected Coleridge Series, 16 (3 parts in 6 vols, Princeton, 2001), i. 453–6, and Mary Wollstonecraft, *Letters written during a short residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark*, *Works*, eds. J. Todd and M. Butler (7 vols, New York, 1989), vi. 237–348. It should also be noted that the shared concerns of Cowper, Coleridge, and Wollstonecraft are the subject of extended analysis in the third chapter of my *Idleness, Contemplation and the Aesthetic, 1750–1830* (Cambridge, forthcoming 2011), and that although I will be making repeated reference to the writing of each of these figures in this paper, this is not an attempt to move beyond the analysis represented there.
6. *Idleness, Contemplation and the Aesthetic*, Chapters 1–3 offer an in-depth portrait of the intellectual context of this idea in the political economy and social philosophy of the second half of the eighteenth century.
7. Wordsworth's 'Slumber', 113.
8. I will be addressing the final unpublished stanza of the poem below.
9. W. Wordsworth, 'Preface', *Lyrical Ballads*, ed. M. Mason (London, 1992), 82.

10. For a fuller treatment of these interconnections, see *Idleness, Contemplation and the Aesthetic*, Chapter 3.
11. S. T. Coleridge, 'Effusion XXXV', *The Complete Poems*, ed. W. Keach (London, 1997), 85–6; for the final version of the poem, 'The Eolian Harp', see Coleridge, *Poetical Works*, i. 231–35.
12. See Wordsworth's 'Slumber', 15–48, where this case is made extremely thoroughly.
13. See, for instance, *Letters written during a short residence*, 248–9.
14. The irony of Cowper and Coleridge is again considered at much greater length, including in the four re-writings of 'Frost at Midnight' that occur between 1798 and 1829, in *Idleness, Contemplation and the Aesthetic*, Chapter 3.
15. *Poetical Works*, ii. 29n.
16. It should be noted that in Coleridge's thought, the problematic status of idle thought lies most importantly in the apparent inactivity of the will when the individual is in such a state. It is for this reason that the *Biographia Literaria* considers the will's operation in poetic creativity at such length; see S. T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, eds. J. Engell and W. J. Bate (2 vols, Princeton, 1983), and *Idleness, Contemplation and the Aesthetic*, Chapter 4.
17. I have constructed a reading of 'Three years' largely along these lines in the Epilogue to *Idleness, Contemplation and the Aesthetic*.