

NO. 19. "WRITTEN WITH A SLATE-PENCIL, ON A STONE, ON THE SIDE
OF THE MOUNTAIN OF BLACK COMB"

BY WILLIAM WORDSWORTH

Commentary by Julia S. Carlson

The Romantic poet most strongly identified with England's Lake District, William Wordsworth (1770–1850), wrote two poems about Black Comb after an 1811 visit to the coastal edge of the district. While "View from the Top of Black Comb" traces, as if in real time, "the amplest range / Of unobstructed prospect" that "British ground commands," its companion piece, "Written with a Slate-pencil, on a Stone, on the Side of the Mountain of Black Comb," withholds the promise of expansive view and further critiques the premises supporting national practices of looking at nature.¹ In the mode of an eighteenth-century nature-inscription—a brief poem inscribed upon an object in a garden—the poem invokes and halts a passerby. But instead of pointing out a sight to a gentleman or woman, the spirit of the place interrupts a "bold Adventurer" on his "hard ascent" to a possible "terraqueous spectacle."² What must the view-seeker learn?

The inscribed stone aligns the gaze of the tourist with the gaze of the topographical surveyor. As historians of cartography have noted, Wordsworth's poem is an early cultural response to the Ordnance Survey of Britain—the ambitious, scientifically modern survey begun in 1791 that aimed to represent the nation according to one standard scale and code.³ Registering the growing power of cartographic representations of landscape, the inscription relates the account of a "geographic Labourer" who "Week after week pursued" his "lonely task" of measuring "height and distance" until a "glimpse ... of Nature's processes" intervened. "[S]uddenly / The many-coloured map before his eyes / Became invisible ...— unthreatened, unproclaimed—," an event, Wordsworth explains elsewhere, that occurred to "one of the engineers, who was employed in making trigonometrical surveys of that region."⁴ The flux of weather exceeds the powers of human visual awareness, bringing the work of knowledge to an abrupt end. If Wordsworth's nature poems offer an "enlarged understanding"⁵ of a scene, this one dramatizes the dynamic strength of nature, capable of thwarting in an instant the measuring of heights and fixing of spatial relations, and it exposes as specious the view of nature from "centre to circumference, unveiled!" Yet by its double negation, the final image of the man, seated with "unclosed eyes / Upon the blinded mountain's silent top!," leaves open the possibility of deeper, spiritual insight for surveyor and tourist alike.

Although it differentiates itself from the map that it critiques, "Written with a Slate-pencil, on a Stone" registers the appeal of cartography by displaying the "many-coloured map" that it obscures. An 1836 revision further details the cartographic medium: "colours, lines, / And the whole surface of the outspread map / Became invisible."⁶ Traces of the Ordnance Survey also surface in a footnote that Wordsworth appended to the poem. A partial paraphrase of Colonel William Mudge, the survey's superintendent (1798–1820), the note situates Black Comb "at the southern extremity of Cumberland" and remarks the great "extent" of its base and view.⁷ Poem and note together, then, orient readers to the region by humbling them before nature.

1. I quote the first printed texts of the poems. "View from the Top of Black Comb," in *Poems by William Wordsworth*, 2 vols. (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1815), 1:305–6.
2. "Written with a Slate-pencil, on a Stone, on the Side of the Mountain of Black Comb," *Poems*, 2:285–86. On nature inscriptions and the convention of the *genius loci* (spirit of the place), see Geoffrey Hartman, "Wordsworth, Inscriptions, and Romantic Nature Poetry," in *Beyond Formalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 206–30.
3. See, for example, *History of the Ordnance Survey*, ed. William A. Seymour (Folkestone: William Dawson and Sons, 1980), 21.
4. *The Fenwick Notes of William Wordsworth*, ed. Jared Curtis (London: Bristol Classical Press, 1993), 29.
5. Hartman, "Wordsworth, Inscriptions," 222.
6. On revisions to the poems and on the importance of maps and guidebooks to Wordsworth, see my "Topographical Measures: Wordsworth's and Crosthwaite's Lines on the Lake District," *Romanticism* 16, no. 1 (2010): 72–93. On Wordsworth's use of notational diction (*line, point, mark*) in relation to Alpine cartography, see my "The Map at the Limits of His Paper: A Cartographic Reading of *The Prelude*, Book 6," *Studies in Romanticism* 49, no. 3 (2010): 375–404.
7. On the paraphrase, see Michael Wiley, *Romantic Geography: Wordsworth and Anglo-European Space* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998), 160.

Julia S. Carlson is Assistant Professor in the Department of English and Comparative Literature at the University of Cincinnati.

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Telephone: 608.263.3992 Fax: 608.263.0762
Email: hcart@geography.wisc.edu
Internet: www.geography.wisc.edu/histcart