

## Family Matters

Old age has often been difficult to define, numerically speaking. Lear's 'fourscore and upwards' comes at the beginning of a period when, as Keith Thomas points out, individuals were only just beginning to acquire a clear notion of exactly how old they were. The previous but also continuing absence of that notion probably explains why, in one London parish alone, the burials of no less than twelve centenarians were recorded between 1583 and 1599 or why, when a man called Harold Jenkins died in 1670, he was assumed to have been 169.<sup>1</sup> Sceptical as one might reasonably be about these figures, there is no doubt that some very old people did exist in former times, even if they were far less numerous than they are today, and one person who appears to have been especially attuned to noticing them was William Wordsworth. He spent a remarkable amount of time in his twenties and thirties travelling around the country on foot, often alone but sometimes with a male companion or his sister Dorothy. This was partly because he had so little money but, as he tramped the roads, he must have come across people much poorer and less fortunate than himself: abandoned women, discharged soldiers but also old men who had no family to support them and had slipped through the gaps of the distinctly patchy and inadequate welfare systems of the time.

That there were such systems is evident from Wordsworth's poem describing 'The Old Cumberland Beggar', first published in the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* (1800). Its narrator, who has recently returned to his native regions, claims that he remembers this figure from his own

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1. The details are in Thomas' lecture.

childhood when he already appeared so old that he scarcely seems any older now. He survives chiefly by visiting various village houses at set times during the week and begging from their far from rich occupants what are usually small items of food. There are those, we learn, who would like to see old men like the Cumberland Beggar housed by the authorities, just as today they are people who would discourage the public from giving money to the homeless on the streets because it only extends the period before they decide to take up the beds which are often (although not always) available and seek help for their addictions or psychological and other problems. The narrator is hostile to this approach. 'May never House, misnamed of Industry, / Make him a captive', he says and feels that the beggar serves a useful social purpose by inciting the locals to charitable acts and allowing them to feel better about themselves afterwards. Seeing him every week helps to prevent that hardening of the heart which results from never being challenged by the sight of fellow human beings in distress. Let the Beggar's blood, he declares, continue to: 'Struggle with frosty air and winter snows; / And let the chartered wind that sweeps the heath / Beat his grey locks against his withered face.'

The old Cumberland Beggar is closely observed. At the beginning of the poem, he is described as sitting down on a low stone structure used for getting on and off horses and looking through the scraps of food he has managed to collect 'with a fixed and serious look / Of idle computation' (perhaps a version of T.S. Eliot's 'deliberate hebetude'). As his 'palsied hand' lifts some of this food to his mouth, all his efforts cannot prevent crumbs being scattered everywhere; but the birds that are gathered round do not yet begin to peck at them because they are too close to where he is sitting. It is a vivid picture. Birds also feature in a description of an old man, published in the first edition of *Lyrical Ballads* and usually called 'Old Man Travelling'; but there they have become so inured to his presence that they 'regard him not' while he himself is 'by nature led / To peace so perfect, that the young behold / With envy, what the old man hardly feels'. 'Animal Tranquillity and Decay' was an alternative title chosen for this sketch and its idea seems to be of the decaying body slowly and painlessly merging back into nature. Bizarre as it may seem, the person Wordsworth could be remembering here is Rousseau who, in his *Discourse on Inequality*, talks of how, in a state of nature, the appetite of old people conveniently diminishes along with their means to satisfy it and claims that, being free of those diseases society brings, they exit this world without anyone much noticing, and

almost without noticing themselves. Old soldiers never die, as the old song goes, they only fade away.

The revolutionary originality of Rousseau was to conceive of civil society as largely a *decline* from a state of nature, rather than the advance it had always been assumed to be in the writings of most previous political thinkers and in those of Hobbes, in particular. As a young man, Wordsworth was a political firebrand and a great admirer of Rousseau so that what might seem paradoxical is how the idea of old people being absorbed back into nature might lead into attitudes which strike us now as unsympathetic, not to say reactionary. He does not enquire, for example, how the old Cumberland beggar himself might feel about the wind beating his grey locks against his withered face, and there are no details in that poem about where he sleeps at night. In this period, the most obvious option would be the poor- or workhouse but that would mean accepting certain rules and restrictions, just as today rough sleepers who seek shelter indoors from one of the charities have to follow at least a minimum of regulation. In Wordsworth's time obligatory labour was the rule for those still capable of it, hence 'House of Industry'; yet it is not a libertarian objection that he makes against the beggar being swept up in the current welfare system, but that he would not then be able to fulfil his function as a stimulus to charitable feelings in others. There is an argument that paying taxes – and in Wordsworth's time there was a Poor Law levy – so that the State can look after those less fortunate than ourselves too conveniently insulates us against what might be the uncomfortable proximity of human distress; but, in making the case for local charity, Wordsworth treats the beggar as a cog in a wheel and gives the impression of not being at all interested in him as a fellow human being.

Different in every way from 'The Old Cumberland Beggar' in its treatment of old age is a poem from the first edition of *Lyrical Ballads* called 'Simon Lee: The Old Huntsman'. Whereas 'The Old Cumberland Beggar' and 'Old Man Travelling' are in a blank verse that allows for all kinds of subtleties, this is in the jingling ballad form which sometimes produces effects that teeter on the ludicrous and were meat and drink to those contemporary critics who were contemptuous of Wordsworth's 'simplicity'. The paradox is that it is in this poem, rather than the other two, that he is most realistic about the physical problems that can afflict old age. Simon has been an enthusiastic huntsman for his employers, blowing his bugle and running so fast in front of or alongside their horses that sometimes, 'He reeled, and was stone-blind.' Now that the

local manor house is empty, the years have caught up with him so that, in addition to having lost an eye:

*He is lean and he is sick,  
His little body's half awry,  
His ankles they are swoln and thick  
His legs are thin and dry.<sup>2</sup>*

His only remaining resource is a small patch of poor land close to his house that he and his wife are too weak to cultivate effectively. The more he labours the more – and it was this kind of detail the critics I refer to dwelt on – ‘His poor old ancles swell’. The narrator comes across him as he is struggling to cut through the stump of an old tree and is able to lend a hand by severing it with one blow. Simon is effusive in his thanks and the poem ends with four lines that demonstrate that a degree of subtlety can be achieved in the ballad form after all:

*I've heard of hearts unkind, kind deeds  
With coldness still returning;  
Alas! the gratitude of men  
Has oftener left me mourning.*

In an essay on ‘Wordsworth and the Question of Ageing’, which appeared in a special number of the journal *Romanticism* in 2019, Mark Sandy dispensed with any unease that might still be created in a reader by the ballad form of ‘Simon Lee’ by claiming that the poem was ‘seriocomic’ and that the effect of its mixed tragic and comic tones was that its protagonist is presented to us ‘with empathy and disdain, delight and derision’. The narrator’s removal of the stump, he went on, is an ‘ill-judged act of kindness that renders Simon’s existence bereft of purpose’:

Futile as Simon’s daily struggle was, his tussle with the decayed tree trunk symbolised his one last lingering attachment to life and the living. Metaphorically, the uprooting of the tree ‘stump’ signifies Simon’s final detachment from life and community. The narrator’s action both short-circuits the possibilities of wider sympathies Wordsworth’s ballad seeks to elicit and

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2. As given in the 1798 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*. Later publications vary slightly in their wording.

positions Simon (now left in a state barely recognizable as living) beyond the communal fellowship of others.

This is not how I read the conclusion of Wordsworth's poem and nor can I find in it any evidence that his attitude to its subject is either disdainful or derisive.

The most obvious way for the old to avoid the 'House of Industry' and its equivalents, or the hit and miss of private charity, was always to be looked after by their children; but, although Simon Lee is married, he is childless, while the decayed and supposedly tranquil old man of Wordsworth's sketch is travelling to a hospital in Falmouth where his sailor son is already dying. The advantage of a family is not only that its members might be there to look after parents as they grow older, but also that it can satisfy what Hannah Arendt calls, in an essay on 'The Concept of History', the "common man's" natural yearning for deathlessness'. It is aspects of this second idea that Wordsworth explores in what is by far his most impressive treatment of old age, the long narrative poem in blank verse which he somewhat pointedly (given its grim content) described as a 'pastoral' and called by the name of its principal character, 'Michael'. Michael is a version of Shakespeare's Adam in *As You Like It* in that he remains fit and healthy in extreme old age. He has, we learn at the beginning of the poem, a 'bodily frame [that] had been from youth to age / Of an unusual strength', words that are repeated at its end, but with ironic effect. The owner of an isolated sheep farm in the Lake District, he and his wife Isabel live a life of incessant labour but, like Abraham and Sarah in the Bible, they have been blessed with a son after the usual time for child-bearing has passed (when, that is, he is about 60 and his wife 20 years younger). The birth of Luke has transformed their lives. As Wordsworth puts it, with a psychological insight with which he is too rarely credited:

*... a child, more than all other gifts  
That earth can offer to declining man,  
Brings hope with it, and forward-looking thoughts,  
And stirrings of inquietude, when they  
By tendency of nature needs must fail.*

Having a son gives meaning to the life of labour Michael and his wife lead since they now have someone to whom they can hand on their farm after they are gone; but in that fine phrase 'stirrings of inquietude', Wordsworth indicates that it also gives them something

to worry about and saves them from the apathy that old age so often brings.

Michael has spent half his life freeing his property from debt but, when his son is eighteen, he is unexpectedly called on to repay a loan that he had guaranteed for his once prosperous brother. The choice that faces him is either to sell off some of his land or to send Luke to a relative in town where he can earn some money. Loth as he is to part with his son, who for several years has been helping him to look after his sheep and to whom he has always been devoted, he decides on this latter course, principally so that his property can remain intact. Before they part, he asks Luke to help him lay the cornerstone of a new sheepfold, which the farm needs, but which will also serve as an emblem of their life together. The hopes Michael and Isobel pin on their son are disappointed and, once in town, he goes to the bad or, as Wordsworth puts it, gives himself 'to evil courses'. The despair this engenders is indicated in the poem by a description of how Michael afterwards often went to the sheepfold he had meant to build but 'never lifted up a single stone'. As in 'The Ruined Cottage', Wordsworth's other great tale of rural tragedy, the remnants of human striving persist in Nature as a symbol of how often it is frustrated.

It is not because Michael worries that, in the event of his wife's death, there will be no one to look after him that he mourns the alienation of his son, although that is in any case a burden which traditionally falls (Wemmick notwithstanding) more on female than male offspring. They are the ones who tend to be more crucially involved in that unofficial contract previously mentioned whereby children look after their parents in exchange for the care they have received before they could look after themselves. What hardly needs saying is that it does not always work. There may be no children, they may have died prematurely, or they may fail to respond appropriately like Lear's two daughters; or like those of 'Father Goriot' in Balzac's version of the Lear theme to which he gave that name. They are not quite heartless monsters like Goneril and Regan but, having reduced their father to miserable poverty by squandering all the money he has willingly and lovingly handed over to them, are too preoccupied with their own affairs to attend his funeral. What, however, perhaps needs to be said about this talk of a contract, is that it is distinctly lopsided. There is, after all, usually an element of choice in having children – at certain periods parents have deliberately had as many as possible in order to insure themselves for the future – whereas no one can choose to be born. Moreover, it is reasonable to believe that there is a duty of care which can stretch well beyond helpless infancy, and

which is sometimes so neglected that children can feel any obligations they may have once incurred should be cancelled out. As John Locke, that expert on social contracts, puts it, ‘the honour due from a child, places in the parents a perpetual right to respect, reverence, support and compliance too, more or less, as the father’s care, cost, and kindness in his education, has been more or less’. Futile as it is to speculate beyond the bounds provided by *King Lear*, the way Goneril and Regan feel able to judge their father, who has ‘ever but slenderly known himself’, does not suggest that they owe him too much gratitude for their upbringing, or that he would ever have had the time or temperament to fulfil his parental duties adequately.

Yet a pattern of reciprocity has mostly always been, and to some extent still is, normal, and nor is Wemmick the only example of a male offspring fully acknowledging its implications. He is a fictional character but Alan Bennett, for example, has written well in several different non-fictional forms about the difficulties of looking after his mother as her dementia worsened, without ever suggesting that he would be prepared to ignore what he instinctively felt was his duty. His accounts of visiting her in hospitals where she is surrounded by other women who have similarly lost their minds can be very funny (dementia being naturally profuse in those non-sequiturs which are often the mainstay of certain kinds of comedy) but, at the same time, they are touching and at no point does he give the impression of wanting to abandon his parent, or that he would feel justified in doing so. The portrait of the old father in David Lodge’s *Deaf Sentence* may be part of a novel but he has made it clear that it is based on his own parent’s increasing loss of mental control and it suggests very much the same decent attitudes as Bennett’s.

It remains the case, however, that it is daughters rather than sons who are more usually involved in looking after their old parents and no surprise therefore that, in the work of perhaps Wordsworth’s most distinguished female contemporary, relations between daughters and (in her case) fathers, figure prominently. When one thinks of daughter/father relationships in Jane Austen, the case that is likely to come first to mind is Elizabeth Bennet’s in *Pride and Prejudice*. Faced with a silly wife and a bevy of daughters, only two of whom he considers to be rational creatures, her father has retreated into ironic detachment and fallen into the bad habit of treating most of the world around him (apart from Elizabeth and her elder sister) as a comic spectacle. The catastrophe that overtakes his family when a young army officer runs away with one of his girls is clearly attributed by Austen, at least in part, to his failure to fulfil his role in the family contract, to a lapse of parental responsibility.