

Wordsworthian Community on Death and Suffering: “Essays upon Epitaphs,” “The Old Cumberland Beggar,” and “The Thorn”

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Abstract The essay analyzes how in Wordsworth a community integrates the loss of the seemingly or actually dead into the community’s natural and social surroundings without reduction of their differences. In the *Essays upon Epitaphs*, Wordsworth treats the inherent communitarian value of the grave and the epitaph that binds together the living and the dead, which makes up the society’s encircled core. Through the burial practice and epitaphic writing social bonds are created and individuals joined. In “The Old Cumberland Beggar,” the old beggar is a kind of ghost, neither living nor dead; neither “properly” excluded nor incorporated in the community. He is constantly re-examined and re-interpreted by the villagers: observing the beggar leads them to a greater understanding of the self. Outside the community the beggar becomes a bond of compassion that binds all villagers and forges social cohesion. Martha Ray’s suffering in “The Thorn” also stitches together the community that is held in the grip of voyeurs and gossips. The narrator and the villagers repeatedly circle back to the enigma of her grief. They transmit and create her tales during which they constantly experience their togetherness in the community.

Key words Wordsworth; Community; Death; Suffering; “Essays upon Epitaphs”; “The Old Cumberland Beggar”; “The Thorn”

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Mourning and loss in Wordsworth's community is the object of a collective representation in which individuals relate to each other. The fundamental source of social cohesion for him is neither the economic interdependence nor the virtuous feeling nor the action *per se* but rather the shared mourning of the loss. In this essay I will analyze how in Wordsworth a community integrates the loss of the seemingly or actually dead into the community's natural and social surroundings without reduction of their difference by analyzing "Essays upon Epitaphs," "The Old Cumberland Beggar," and "The Thorn." For Wordsworth people in the community produce the discourses that would include and represent the loss of the dead without letting it be fully absorbed in the community. An analysis of how he mediates death and loss should provide us with the means to figure out how the notion of community functions in Wordsworth's thought, and where it ought to be located.

Wordsworth frequently introduces seemingly or actually dead figures in his poetry: the boy of Winander, the blind beggar, the drowned man, and the discharged soldier, to cite some examples in *The Prelude*. He frequently draws on a metaphysical absence or loss to show how a community is often built upon death and suffering. "Essays upon Epitaphs" gives a very good picture of how the notion of community functions in Wordsworth's thought in relation to death. He opens his "Essays" by devoting several pages to a consideration of burial practices from ancient time to the present. Burial and memorials of the dead were the earliest forms and an important part of ancient social practice. Wordsworth, quoting Camden, invokes the central place of burial in the constitution of community: "Never any neglected burial but some savage nations" (*PW* 2: 49). What he implies is that the body of the deceased in civil society is not like the carcass of some animal but must be respected as a human being. Each society has its own peculiar way of burying and respecting the dead. According to Wordsworth, there is a twofold desire of burial custom: "first, to guard the remains of the deceased from irreverent approach or from savage violation: and, secondly to preserve their memory."¹ Almost all the nations express the fact of death by a proper burial not only for reasons of hygiene but for honoring and remembering a deceased person. The respect for and memorial of the dead assume, Wordsworth argues, that some part of our nature is imperishable. The burial practice rests on the belief in immortality: "without the consciousness of a principle of immortality in the human soul, Man could never have had awakened in him the desire to live in the remembrance of his fellows: mere love or the yearning of kind towards kind, could not have produced it" (*PW* 2: 50). If we do not have an intimation or assurance of

immortality within us, there would be no wish to be remembered by our friends or kindred after death; thus, no burial practice that demands its proper place and a proper burial, and finally no constitution of the ideal community based on death and suffering.

How and where individuals bury the dead are determined by socio-cultural considerations. The particular mode of burying and commemorating the dead, which varies from one culture to another, represents a particular character of one's society, creating a symbolic tie between living and dead, as Michele Turner Sharp observes, "the return of the body to its proper place, giving it a proper burial, grounds the constitution of the ideal community" (391-92). In order to point out the places where their dead are interred, the grave was marked with certain external items as sticks and rocks. With the development of written language, epitaphic writing became the most efficient way to bury the dead and to memorialize the deceased. "As soon as nations had learned the use of letters, epitaphs were inscribed upon these monuments: in order that their intention might be more surely and adequately fulfilled" (*PW* 2: 50). Since epitaphic writing was developed out of the need to point out the burial place, it is not essentially different from the rude sticks and rocks and mounds of earth. The well-wrought epitaph is a kind of fundamental glue in society for the maintenance of social structure. In consistent with epitaphic writing, Wordsworth discusses the figure of personification, or prosopopoeia. The passersby reading the epitaph are most likely to contemplate their ultimate death; the corpse becomes an image of what they will become. The epitaph asks them to remember the dead and to recognize their inevitable death: it makes them see themselves as double, though incomplete, of the dead. As Debra Fried argues, "Remember me[the dead]" means, in part, "repeat me" (617).

The burial practice and the epitaph are a key to producing and enforcing identity of idealized community that Wordsworth's "Essays" intends. Wordsworth conceives of his community being substantially dependent upon a coherent practice of burial and epitaphic writing, which stitch together the symbolic strands of community into a significant whole, the chain of elements now making up cultural identity. By the side of the grave, he says:

We suffer and we weep with the same heart: we love and are anxious for one another in one spirit; our hopes look to the same quarter; and the virtues by which we are all to be furthered and supported, as patience, meekness, good-will, justice, temperance, and temperate desires, are in an equal degree the concern of us all. Let an Epitaph, then, contain at least these

acknowledgements to our common nature. (*PW* 2:59)

The death and ritual in the community forms a useful filter through which fundamental traits of a given community come into focus. Wordsworth argues that identity of community is here as a 'communion' which can only be based upon mourning of death. If one feels he belongs to a community, it cannot be because he has a face-to-face relation with its dead. And yet there is an undeniable 'reality' in this imagined communion. Community is conceived because, regardless of the actual inequality that may prevail in each in life, the grave "gathers all human beings to itself, and equalizes the lofty and the low" (*PW* 2:59). Through burial practice and epitaph, community is conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Community emerges through people conceiving themselves to be part of a collectivity as communally bound.

The rural community to Wordsworth seems the sort of idealized community that unites the living and the dead: it is the site par excellence for the living's relation to death and loss. Neither too close nor too far, the rural community might ideally provide the living with a healthful and beneficent relation to the dead. The impression of death must be counterbalanced not only by the belief in immortality but also by a proper distance from the inhabitants of large towns and cities. The dead in the rural community is thus at a proper remove from the injurious effects on the living. The rural community thus not only involves territorial and geographic boundaries, but also possesses an emotional, spiritual and cultural basis. Wordsworth prefers among the rural community a village church-yard for the grave of the dead that is "lying as it does in the lap of Nature" and "most favorably contrasted with that of a town crowded population" (*PW* 2: 55). The dead are deposited in close connection with the community's site of worship upon the most serious and solemn affections of the human mind. Wordsworth describes the village church-yard rich in color:

The sensations of pious cheerfulness, which attend the celebration of the Sabbath-day in rural places, are profitably chastised by the sight of the graves of kindred and friends, gathered together in that general home towards which the thoughtful yet happy spectators themselves are journeying. Hence a parish-church, in the stillness of the country, is a visible centre of a community of the living and the dead; a point to which are habitually referred the nearest concerns of both. (*PW* 2: 55-56)

The village church-yard is the ideal place for the burial of the dead, because both in cities and villages, it combines the place of burial and place of worship and successfully mediates death and the loss: it provides its visitors with the site in which they are most likely to contemplate their ultimate spiritual destination as well as personal or social sorrow and admiration, and to worship upon time and eternity. The church-yard situates the dead in the proper place with the proper burial, being neither fully present nor fully absent and belonging to a domain which allows the dead with and within the living. Wordsworth tries to present the rural community, best exemplified in the village church-yard, as the most proper place for the dead and universalizes it as a core of identity of community between living and dead. The grave in rural community is “the joint offspring of the worth of the dead and the affections of the living” (*PW* 2: 58). It visibly presents the “strength and sanctity of these feelings which persons in humble stations of society connect with their departed friends and kindred” (*PW* 2: 65). Burial within the rural community effectively promotes the communion between living and dead. Those feelings of attachment come from the inhabitants’ desire for their body to return to their proper place of burial. The individuals are bound together by imaginative togetherness with their forefathers: “Strong and unconquerable still continues to be the desire of all, that their bones should rest by the side of their forefathers, and very poor persons should provide that their bodies should be conveyed if necessary to a great distance to obtain the last satisfaction” (*PW* 2: 65). Those feelings of belonging to the community forge the social, psychological and affective-sentimental link among individuals.

Wordsworth admits that the commonality is never fully communicated or made present. In “We are Seven,” for example, a rustic child’s stubborn refusal to distinguish between living and dead in her family also serves to demonstrate the fundamental relation of the living to the dead. The narrator, however, is uneasy at her refusal as though being too close to the dead would make his enlightened understanding of community fall apart. The proper distance from death is necessary for keeping the living and the dead together. While Wordsworth tries to imagine a cultural nexus in the grave around which various forces of community can congeal to constitute the ideal community, he also offers irresolvable difference between living and dead behind such a nexus. His assumption of a communal identity does not fall into a communal essentialism; his turn to burial, epigraph, the rural community contains ambivalent struggle between his efforts at cultural unity and the irreducible difference of the living from the dead. Wordsworth’s ambivalent relation to death is well illustrated in his reverie:

I have been roused from this reverie by a consciousness suddenly flashing upon me, of the anxieties, the perturbations, and in many instances, the vices and rancorous dispositions, by which the hearts of those who lie under so smooth a surface and so fair an outside have been agitated. The image of an unruffled sea has still remained; but my fancy has penetrated into the depths of that sea, — with accompanying thoughts of shipwreck, of the destruction of the mariner's hopes, the bones of drowned men heaped together, monsters of the deep, and all the hideous and confused sights which Clearence saw in his dream. (PW 2: 64)

Just as the smooth surface of the sea hides the shipwreck and the heaps of drowned men's bones, so does the sheltered interior of the tomb contain the horrible face of death that has the state of radical indeterminacy. The indeterminacy of death makes its absolute burial and mourning impossible: the ghostly voices hover over any burial and resolution of mourning. While building the communal identity upon death and burial, Wordsworth are keenly aware of the impossibility of eliminating the ghostly domain between living and dead, real and ideal, history and myth. His reverie not only invokes the power of death in constitution of community but also conjures up the indeterminable horizon that cannot be reduced to any identity. While community may be threatened from within by a ghostly voice, the poet cannot exorcise it, because the voice does not have a determinate ontological status belonging to an utterly unknown domain without being closed in upon itself, and it is also because this would be to destroy the magic of constituting community itself.

The figure of the old beggar in "The Old Cumberland Beggar" gives a vivid illustration of the dead within the living. His decrepitude is too extreme to apply only to one already dead. The old man has endured so long that it no longer pains him. He is a kind of ghost existing between living and dead, neither fully present nor fully absent in the community. As an inassimilable being, he has no proper place within the community and yet stitches the members of the community into a significant whole. In order to stress the in-between state of the beggar, Wordsworth carefully describes the beggar and the surrounding about him. The poet details the beggar's meal, his seat by the road, the small birds that scavenge for crumbs. What is striking about his presentation of the opening stanza is that the beggar appears to straddle between an animal state and a ruined piece of nature. His seat, "a low structure of rude masonry / Built at the foot of a huge hill"² — that is, near a human construct and a natural feature, suggests his state between the

natural world and the human village. The combination of landmarks in order and disorder also emphasizes the old beggar's in-between state. The second stone step of old masonry upon which he sits is a well-ordered resting place. Yet his food he scanned seriously in "idle computations" "scattered from his palsied hand" (l. 16). Wordsworth's careful description of the old beggar serves a function for locating the beggar within and without the community.

The beggar is isolated from the community and yet undeniably belongs to it. At first sight the old man seems to be an isolated figure: "Surrounded by those wild unpeopled hills, / He sat, and ate his food in solitude" (ll. 14-15). But he is a part of the community and connected to the villagers — village dames, the post-boy, the girl who tends the toll-gate, and the villagers who live nearby. As the beggar proceeds on his walk, he creates the act of mild but habitual charity in those around him. Each of the villagers, performing certain act for him, recalls the common link of feeling of these acts. That the act of charity takes place along the road is of importance, because the path is the common space of the community in which the villagers participate in the regular social practices, as Nayar points out:

Walking by members of a community constitutes a social practice through which the land or path becomes a common space. Thus the community is concerned about the paths available for walking, the nature of the walkers (whether they are vagrants or criminals), and the conventions of walking (making way for the carriages of lords, for example, or tollgates where one stops). The social practice of walking is different for different people. (81)

The old man walking along the road brings into being the moral relation among the villagers: the horseman lodges a coin safely "Within the old Man's hat" (l. 29); the girl "lifts the latch for him that he may pass" (l. 36); the post-boy, harried with business, shouts to him from behind, but if the old man doesn't hear, turns his carriage "with less noisy wheels to the roadside" (l. 41). The villagers incorporate the beggar in their lives by doing certain things for him. His extreme decrepitude calls forth the benevolence of others, and "his incorporation in the lives of other people humanizes the life of a community" (Bromwich 148). Wordsworth describes the good of the moral relations that the beggar brings into being for the villagers:

While from door to door,
This old Man creeps, the villagers in him
Behold a record which together binds

Past deeds and offices of charity
 Else unremembered. . . (ll. 87-90)

The beggar's sorry lot prompts the charity of the villagers around him: "the old man's excessive suffering can transform the gaze [of the villagers] from a hostile to a benevolent presence" (Collings 110). But he is not only an object of charity. The old man is also a living memorial to that kindness. He endows it with a human face and connects his benefactors with their own better selves long past, and with one another.

The common link also is that the beggar disrupts and reforms the villagers' routines. As he proceeds along the road, he stops a succession of the villagers in their tracks or diverts them from their tasks. The beggar interrupts the villager's labor and daily schedules to form an unintended routine of charity: the horseman does not toss the beggar a coin, but stops, to make sure the alms are lodged safely in the man's hat; the tollgate girl stops her spinning and lifts the latch for him to pass; the post-boy slows down his horses and passes him on the roadside in order to avoid disturbing the man. Wordsworth defends the beggar's worth, however, not for an economy of mutually beneficial exchange; he repels every moral pretension of those who refer all conduct to a principle of economic utility. In fact, the beggar never returns thanks for his benefactors or pronounces blessing upon the heads of his benefactors. The common link of feeling that binds together the acts of the villagers does not come from the feelings that can be read into the beggar; rather it is not only from temporal interruption of a circular economy, of reciprocation and reappropriation, of generosity and gratitude. The old man ignores the social conventions that hold society together.

The ultimate factor by which the beggar causes the disturbance is the villagers' and the narrator's inaccessibility to the old man's feelings. We don't know what is going on in the man's mind. The man is so stooped, and his eyes travel the ground at the same slow pace of his walk, seeing one little span of earth for a moment. One cannot be sure how badly he has a problem with his hearing which may be as bad as his eyes. Such an infirm man might not be able to hear. The possibility is implied when Wordsworth describes experiences that would be a blessing for the beggar in comparison to being pent up in a workhouse that would utterly drain him by "Those life-consuming sounds [of machinery and labor] that clog the air" (l. 181):

Let him be free of mountain solitudes,
 And have around him, *whether heard or not*,

The pleasant melody of woodland birds.
 Few are his pleasures. . . (ll. 183-186:*myemphasis*)

Even as the poet wishes the beggar will have some pleasure as he listens to the “melody of woodland birds,” he reminds us that the old man might not be able to hear it. In addition to our inaccessibility to the old man’s mind due to his infirm eyes and hearings, we are not sure that the beggar has been or will be happy because of his exposure to winter winds. His endurance of winter winds could be summed up either as suffering or as pleasure. The poet’s wish may have nothing to do with the old man’s experience of himself. Though the man is a familiar figure to the poet and the villagers, there exists a distance that cannot find a solid bridge between them. The feelings generated in relation to the old man begin and end in speculation while the beggar’s feelings remain indecipherable. As Joshua King argues, “the quality of feeling generated by the beggar’s description is important not for any revelation of the beggar’s own feelings” but “for the way it can turn the beggar and his inscrutability into a provocative obstacle” (50). We confront the impossibility of imagining themselves into his feelings and thoughts.

The beggar belongs to nowhere. He is outside the community possessing nothing but the spot of earth he sees; he does not participate in the regular spatial practices; he ignores the social conventions of sympathy that expects gratitude for charity. Outside the community, however, the old man binds its members together as he walks along the common land or path. As the villagers do for him some act of charity, they feel they belong to the same moral community. The beggar vividly recalls their own peculiar link in the community, building their charity up as an assurance of a moral relation. In the old beggar as an entity between living and dead, Wordsworth envisions a unified community and fundamental glue for keeping social structure: the ghostly beggar creating both community and individual bound.

In “The Thorn” Martha Ray’s grief attracts around her a community of voyeurs and gossips, producing social cohesion. The discourses of the villagers and the narrator are insufficient and interminable to interpret and fix her grief, ever recounting her repeated cries of “O misery! Oh misery!”³ Obsessed by her grief and suffering of Martha Ray, the narrator responds to the mystery in insistent struggles to measure and dissect its uncertainty throughout the poem. He desires to express the enigma of her misery, fixing the real of the mysterious excess that constantly displaces his desire and representation. His repetitive mind circles back to a single, grave-shaped plot associated with Martha’s child.

In his struggles to control and stabilize the haunting spot, the narrator reduces

it to mathematical order and positive fact. Beginning with a brute and concrete fact — “There is a thorn” in the first stanza, he measures the thorn in the third stanza in absurd precision: “Not higher than a two-years’ child / It stands erect this aged thorn” (ll. 5-6). As he leads us from the thorn to a neighboring pond, and to a hill of moss, his concern with measurement becomes obsessive. The thorn is “five yard” from the path,” and “to the left, three yards beyond” is the pond. He proceeds to measure it “from side to side” (l. 32): “’Tis three feet long and two feet wide” (l. 33). The narrator turns to numbers to resolve the enigmatic nature of the mystery to determine whether it is a proper size for an infant’s grave. The telescope he carries to the mountaintop functions as a symbol of his obsession with clear and distinct evidence as well as with his curiosity of the voyeur. He conducts his telescopic observation to divide and analyze the thorn, pond and mossy hill, and to avoid all those causes of error, however minute. His observation reads, interprets, and translates the mysterious spots into an object of uncritical positivism. He then tells us about Martha Ray who often goes to the spot on that mountain top and weeps to herself crying “Oh misery! Oh misery!” In order to identify her, the narrator even said what he knows previously about this women’s life concerning her abandonment, her pregnancy, and her madness.

Despite his repeated attempts to fix the thorn, pond, hill of moss in a conceptual order, and despite his long recount of Martha’s life, the narrator imbues a tale of local superstitions with his own perspective, imagination and obsession. His mind describes the concrete landscape immediately personifying it. Even at the beginning the thorn looks so old and gray, like a human being, and struggles to reach the height of a two-year-old child against the moss that is pulling it to the ground. His obsessive curiosity transforms what he sees into what he craves to see. The narrator’s first mention of “infant” remains figurative. In describing the “heap of earth o’ergrown with moss” (l. 49), the narrator makes it clear that it is “like an infant’s grave in size” (l. 52). The mound is similar to, but different from an infant’s grave. After reiterating his crucial meeting with Martha Ray, however, the figurative “infant” becomes literal. He says that he sees Martha’s face close and hears her cry, “Oh woe is me! Oh misery!” Encouraged by his own testimony, he admits the rumors about Martha and transforms the fundamental object of his obsession into an undeniable fact: “I’ve heard the scarlet moss is red / With drops of that poor infant’s blood” (ll. 221-222). The “infant” begins to refer to a specific child. Though cautious (“I’ve hear”), he attempts to represent the spot not as an enigmatic place but as a crime scene of Martha’s murder of her child. The fantasy of this crime is intensified by a kind of looking into the pond where one can see the

baby's face looking back.

At the most triumphal moment, the narrator suddenly shies away from the compulsive center of his interest: "But kill a new-born infant thus! I do not think she could" (ll. 223-224). He is reluctant to come to the core of his own fantasy. As a faithful observer, the narrator circles his attention back to the mysterious spot five times, and relentlessly narrows his focus on it. Yet just before he is about to encounter what he wants to see, he suddenly keeps away from the conclusion his desire may inevitably arrive at. His inability to face his own desire is already symbolized by his flight from Martha at their first meeting. It is the day when the visibility is wretched: "A storm came on, and I could see / No object higher than my knee" (ll. 186-87). Instead of the jutting crag he thinks he sees, he finds "A woman seated on the ground." When Martha suddenly appears close before him, he flees:

I did not speak — I saw her face,
Her face it was enough for me. (ll. 199-200)

As the narrator avoids being face to face with her, he immediately denies the possibility of her killing her own child. Despite all the implication that he has literally measured the spot and that he meets her grief head on himself, he suddenly turns to the village gossip to hear a firm fact of her. Now he seems stuck "between disclaiming firm knowledge and thirsting for it" (Hartman 148). While wishing to have a fixed object, he evades everything that might satisfy it. He repeatedly displaces his desire to keep it going, only for its own sake. His desire exists in the movement from one meaning to another in its perpetual deferral. His repeated referral to the mysterious spot constantly gives shape to his fantastic surmising. While Wordsworth observes in his "Note to 'The Thorn'" how "the mind luxuriates in the repetition of words which appear successfully to communicate its feeling" (*PW* 2: 513), repetition here produces the object of his obsession: his obsessive repetition designates and shapes his fantasy around Martha's mourning and loss.

The desire for the narrator is a desire for another meaning, constantly slipping from one meaning to the next. This does not mean that his desire can be simply reduced yearning or pining for something inassimilable: it is not to have the final meaning but to produce another meaning. We are left, at the end of the poem, with the repetition of the mystery the narrator describes again and again: the thorn, the pond, the mossy hill, and Martha crying, "Oh woe is me! Oh misery!" His continual return to the mysterious spot and repeated recount of it can be seen as an attempt to

move his desire on and on. The objects of his obsession represent the inscape of his mind. As Stephen Maxfield Parrish argues, the events of the poem are unimportant “except [that] they reflect the working of the narrator’s imagination” (155). The perception of the thorn, the pond, and the mossy hill shifts through the repeated retelling of his tale. The thorn is impersonated as Martha and becomes closely the symbol-laden scene in her absence. She, personifying his own anxious passion, remains a personification rather than a person. As Jerome Christensen explicitly points out, “she is herself a figure of passion and propagation” (276). Her attributes he gives us are so dominated by her grief and suffering without which there seems to be no way to identify her; she merely gives a face to an inassimilable obstacle of her passion. While the narrator attempts to represent her by a developing and exploratory description toward her, he perpetually displaces her and revolves around an inexplicable sigh or cry. Martha’s body is possessed by the power of endless weeping and her cry “Oh misery! Oh misery!” What matters to him is not her grief itself, but his retelling of it and the process of translating the suffering into tale, even if the tale is only a representation of her mourning. The thorn, the pond, the mossy hill, and Martha’s cry are taken up only on the basis of their value as his tale.

The narrator’s tale is, however, only one of many different versions circulating around the village. Though he has only recently arrived in this “village or country town of which he was not a native” (*PW* 2: 513), and though he may be more prone to believe local superstitions, his account of Martha and his related tale are not much different from village gossip. Attempting to answer to a series of questions concerning the thorn, the pond, the hill of moss, he admits that he cannot answer them, but immediately proceeds to rely on the opinions of the other villagers (Some say[l. 216]... But all and each agree[l. 218]... Some say[l. 255]... some had sworn an oath[l. 232]). The incidents took place “some two and twenty” (l. 115) years ago and it was long before he came to the village, the narrator’s tale is in concordance with the villagers’. Village gossip and recollection about Martha are dependent upon her inexplicable grief, haunting and hovering over the village and the community. Stumbling over the enigma of her suffering, the community repeatedly returns to the site of her grief and attempts to interpret and translate its limit into another gossip. The circulation or creation of the gossip binds the community together around its limit, sustaining the communal core. In a sense Martha’s suffering “exists for others” (Fosso 155). The community functions well, however, so long as the limit is veiled from the villagers. It is no wonder that some villagers, who averred that Martha should be brought to “public justice,” stop their search

for the child's bone when "the beauteous hill of moss / Before their eyes began to stir" (l. 236-37). Martha's suffering cannot and should not be fully known to them, since the community is organized by her interminable mourning and sustained by its constant circulation and creation of the gossip about her. Thus, despite its unreliability, the village gossip of her suffering binds together the community experienced together by the villagers in their separation from the mystery of her suffering.

Wordsworth's community is built on mourning and loss that binds together the community experienced together by its members who constantly incorporates the loss without reduction of its enigma. In the *Essays upon Epitaphs*, Wordsworth treats the inherent communitarian value of the grave and the epitaph that binds together the living and the dead and that makes up the society's encircled core. Through the burial practice and epitaphic writing social bonds are created and individuals joined. In "The Old Cumberland Beggar," the old beggar is a kind of ghost neither living nor dead; neither "properly" excluded nor incorporated in the community. He is constantly re-examined and re-interpreted by the villagers; observing the beggar leads them to a greater understanding of the self. Outside the community the beggar becomes a bond of compassion that binds all villagers and forges social cohesion. Martha Ray's suffering in "The Thorn" also stitches together the community that is held in the grip of voyeurs and gossips. The narrator and the villagers repeatedly circle back to the enigma of her grief. They transmit and create her tales during which they constantly experience their togetherness in the community.

Notes

1. William Wordsworth. "Essays Upon Epitaphs." *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*. Ed. W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser. 3 vols. New York: Oxford UP, 1974: 2: 50, which is hereafter cited as *PW*.
2. William Wordsworth. "The Old Cumberland Beggar." *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*. Ed. Ernest de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire. 5 vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1949: 5: 3-4.
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