

# “WE ARE SEVEN” AND THE FIRST BRITISH CENSUS

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HOLLIS ROBBINS

**W**illiam Wordsworth’s “We Are Seven,” first published in Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s 1798 volume, *Lyrical Ballads*, features a rustic setting, an innocent child, and a poetic speaker whose question, “how many may you be?” provokes the poem’s title. As scholars have long noted, the prominence of counting in this poem, published the same year as Thomas Malthus’s “Essay on the Principle of Population,” is essential to the child’s request to register formally the presence of her dead sister and brother. The question “how many,” however, may be structured less by Wordsworth’s interest in poetic “experiments,” as he describes his work in the Advertisement to *Lyrical Ballads*, than by contemporary policy debates about enumerating the rural population, culminating in the first British census of 1801.<sup>1</sup>

Clearly, “We Are Seven” is a poem about counting people. The disagreement between the speaker and the little maid he encounters is entirely about the number of siblings who dwell with her in her cottage. The girl claims seven: in addition to herself, she has six brothers and sisters—two are dead, two are living elsewhere, and two have gone to sea. The speaker argues, “you are five”: if two are dead, only five are left. Oliver Goldsmith’s popular “The Deserted Village” (1770) had previously offered a poignant poetic account of the disruption of rural life as a generation began moving away. Goldsmith, in a published dedication to Sir Joshua Reynolds, demurs that the poem “is not the place to enter into an enquiry, whether the country be depopulating or not.”<sup>2</sup> Yet the lines “A time there was, ere England’s griefs began, / When every rood of ground maintain’d its man” (57–58) evoke not only the myth of a more stable era, but also the ideology that individuals and particular parcels of land are naturally linked.<sup>3</sup> Wordsworth’s “We Are Seven” promotes a similarly traditional link between individuals and the place they were born. The little maid claims as present a family community that perhaps once existed in the cottage but does not any longer. The questioner agrees to count as present four siblings who have, in Goldsmith’s terms, deserted the village. Registering them as present, as belonging to the cottage with the little maid, is a politically conservative act that would appeal to a nation undergoing the disruptions of the Industrial Revolution.

Regardless of formal address, most individuals dwell in multiple homes, in at least two family jurisdictions, as well as with the memories of those with whom they have dwelt in the

past. The convention of counting people at a particular “home” represses the unsettling—and equally poetic—adult reality of having two simultaneously existing homes and families: one born into and another made by marriage or by another arrangement. Mid-eighteenth-century debates about census-taking involved arguments over whether to count people in their dwelling place or to estimate population from numbers of graves in a parish, from aggregate consumption of grain and bread, or from numbers of houses and windows.<sup>4</sup> But by 1800, the policy of counting individuals in their primary dwelling places had prevailed in Parliament. Wordsworth’s “We Are Seven,” published at the height of Britain’s census-taking debates, takes sides on the jurisdictional question of “home” in the poetic speaker’s important ideological claim that “you are five.”

### I: Brief History of the Census

In 1798 there had never been a complete and accurate count of Britain’s population. Since the reign of Henry VIII, municipalities and parishes had kept fairly accurate registers of births, deaths, and marriages, but these, combined with Hearth Tax rolls (lists of dwellings) were at best inexact proxies for aggregate numbers of persons.<sup>5</sup> David Hume’s “Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations” (1752) and Robert Wallace’s *Dissertation on the Numbers of Mankind in Ancient and Modern Times* (1753) debated the proposition that the population of mankind in Greek and Roman times was greater than it was in their own era.<sup>6</sup> Both essays stimulated interest in the central empirical question: what exactly was the population of Britain? In 1753, Parliament debated an “Act for Taking and Registering an Annual Account of the Total Number of People and the Total Number of Marriages, Births and Deaths; and also the Total Number of Poor receiving Alms from every Parish and Extraparochial Place in Great Britain.”<sup>7</sup> The goal of the project was deemed worthy by nearly everyone, but in practice, gathering statistics on such demographic trends as birth rates, death rates, life span, emigration, and depopulation would require an unprecedented official intrusion into private family matters. In a rowdy debate in the pages of *The Gentleman’s Magazine*, William Thornton argued that the proposal was “totally subversive of the last remains of English liberty.” If any government official came nosing about, asking the “number and circumstances of my family,” he continued, “I would refuse it; and, if he persisted in the affront, I would order my servants to give him the discipline of the horse pond.”<sup>8</sup> Not surprisingly, the bill lapsed at the end of the session. A second try, a “Bill for Obliging all Parishes in this Kingdom to Keep Proper Registers of Births, Deaths, and Marriages,” also failed to pass in 1758.<sup>9</sup>

In 1780, the Reverend Richard Price published a pamphlet titled “Of Population; the General Causes which Promote it or Obstruct it; and the Present State of it in England Compared with its State Formerly.”<sup>10</sup> He published a second edition the following year with an added “Postscript, containing A Review of the Controversy relating to the State of Population in England and Wales since the Revolution.”<sup>11</sup> In this version Price articulated several salutary reasons for taking a census, such as infant mortality and ascertaining the number of needy widows and children. Price’s pamphlets changed the tenor of the debate: curiosity about the

health of the population overpowered fears of government intrusion and interest in collecting data was revived.

In 1796, a young Oxford man named John Rickman, who was later to become a close friend of Charles Lamb and Robert Southey (and an acquaintance of Coleridge and Wordsworth), wrote a memorandum titled: "Thoughts on the Utility and Facility of a general Enumeration of the people of the British Empire."<sup>12</sup> His argument for the economic advantages of a scientific census caught the eye of future Speaker Charles Abbot, who brought Rickman into his circle of advisors and used the principles of the memorandum to begin crafting a new census bill. In 1798, the publication of Thomas Malthus's anonymous and provocative "Essay on the Principle of Population" raised widespread concern about population and hunger and increased the public's interest in an "official" enumeration of hungry mouths.<sup>13</sup> By 1800, Speaker Abbot had drafted and introduced "An Act for taking an Account of the Population of Great Britain, and of the Increase or Diminution thereof." The Act was passed without opposition on December 3, 1800, and John Rickman was put in charge of its administration. The first census was conducted on March 10, 1801.

Wordsworth's "We Are Seven" was composed in the spring of 1798 on a walking tour with Coleridge and Wordsworth's sister, Dorothy.<sup>14</sup> While Frances Ferguson suggests that the Wordsworthian "walking tour" is less a realistic gesture than a linguistic motif, the wanderings of census-takers would become a fact of life within three years.<sup>15</sup> The poem's unapologetic interrogator (he has already asked the maid her age) reads as a kind of "official" enumerator in an encounter consistent with debates that were already part of the national consciousness. The 1800 Act followed closely the provisions of the 1753 census proposal, under which Overseers of the Poor or "other fit persons" were to go from house to house in their parish every year "recording the numbers of persons actually dwelling in each house during the twelve preceding hours, distinguishing separately for males and females," as well as numbers of married persons, numbers of the poor in receipt of alms during the previous year, births, and deaths; the registration of births was to include day of birth, sex, and name of the father and mother; registration of deaths was to include day of death, sex, age, and disease: "special registry books, with printed headings for the appropriate columns, were to be provided by each parish at its own expense, and the information on births and deaths was to be entered, without charge, in these books."<sup>16</sup> Information was to be collected from each parish or township regarding the numbers of inhabited and uninhabited houses, numbers of families, persons, numbers of persons in particular occupations, and a retroactive collection of numbers of baptisms, burials, and marriages from the past century. The enumerators were to conduct personal enquiries of householders and transmit their data on prescribed schedules back to London.<sup>17</sup>

Fifty years later, John Rickman proposed the following schedule for the use of enumerators in organizing the data to be collected:

1. The number of inhabited houses, the number of uninhabited houses, and the number of families inhabiting each house;
2. The number of persons, excluding soldiers and sailors, found in the parish on the day of inquiry;
3. The number of persons engaged in trade, agriculture, manufacture, and the number not so engaged;
4. The number of baptisms and funerals during every period of ten years from 1700 to 1780, and from 1780 to 1800, in each year;
5. The number of marriages yearly between 1754 and 1800; and
6. Explanatory remarks.<sup>18</sup>

This polling form accounts for several points of engagement between the speaker and the girl in “We Are Seven”: the house, the number of inhabitants, the occupation of the inhabitants, and the idea that inhabitants of the house are families. Both texts also imply that it is normal to be walking around asking questions about dwellings and inhabitants.<sup>19</sup>

Linking individuals to particular addresses was not the only census policy possible. Biblical census records in the books of Exodus and Numbers count hundreds of thousands of homeless Israelites (tribes and generations) on the march; Luke 2.3–5 tells of a young family forced to go home to be counted: Mary’s home was not Bethlehem, but she was counted there because of Joseph’s lineage and to satisfy a biblical prophecy.<sup>20</sup> Roman censuses were concerned with numbers of fighting men and amount of property, not their relationship with a particular municipality. After the Stamp Act of 1765 required the numbering of houses and streets, the idea of numbering people in their houses seemed logical.

It is certainly true, as Susan Wolfson observes, that the questions in “We Are Seven” “betray disturbing evidence of a reduced, and reducing, imagination.”<sup>21</sup> But reducing individual subjectivities to numbers and categories is precisely the goal of census-taking. Census forms make no distinction between eight and eight and a half or between cottages and hovels; it is up to the reducing mind to suppress variation in pursuit of organization. The entire text of “We Are Seven” serves as a kind of poetical “explanatory remark”; arguably nearly every householder would need to resort to long explanations in filling out such a form. In 1801, the definition of various types of dwellings, as well as the definition of the terms “family” and “inhabited,” were left to the discretion of the census-taker.<sup>22</sup> It wasn’t until 1841 that British census law decreed: “By ‘House’ is meant Dwelling House; and every building in which any person habitually sleeps must be considered as a dwelling house.”<sup>23</sup> Edward Higgs notes that “on occasion the meaning of the term ‘relationship’ could be hopelessly misconstrued, as in the case of the farm labourer living in a shed at the bottom of a farmer’s garden who described his relationship to the head of the family as ‘friendly.’”<sup>24</sup> As Wolfson’s comment indicates, scholarly interest in the poem has largely focused on the dramatic nature of the conflict between the questioner and the girl, not on the policy underwriting the conflict—or the equally important issue of what the two figures are not arguing about.<sup>25</sup> That is, while the practice of modern census taking is to count people and houses and rep-

resent both in a numerical form, underlying the policy is a normative assumption of a link between a person and a particular dwelling place.<sup>26</sup> Wordsworth establishes a strong connection in the second stanza with the label “cottage girl”; the poem explicitly settles an issue that was as yet unsettled.

## II: Wordsworth’s Poetic Juris-Diction

As if joining the debate over whether it would be considered appropriate to wander around the countryside of England and Wales knocking on doors and inquiring into the whereabouts and well being of cottage inhabitants, *Lyrical Ballads* advertises itself as an experiment in doing just this, registering “human passions, human characters, and human interests.”<sup>27</sup> Featuring poems such as “The Female Vagrant,” “The Idiot Boy,” and “Old Man travelling,” the twenty-three poems of *Lyrical Ballads* (nineteen by Wordsworth, four by Coleridge) present themselves as a kind of census of rural life. Perhaps Rickman ought to have added poets to his list of official enumerators. “We Are Seven” appears tenth in the volume.

Consider the fifth, seventh, and ninth stanzas of the poem:

‘And where are they, I pray you tell?’  
 She answered, ‘Seven are we,  
 ‘And two of us at Conway dwell,  
 ‘And two are gone to sea.”  
 . . .

You say that two at Conway dwell,  
 ‘And two are gone to sea,  
 ‘Yet you are seven; I pray you tell  
 ‘Sweet Maid, how this may be?’  
 . . .

‘You run about, my little maid,  
 ‘Your limbs they are alive;  
 ‘If two are in the church-yard laid,  
 ‘Then ye are only five.’

The questioner presses the girl on the question of the dead siblings but not about the ones who have gone away. When she says that two of the siblings “dwell” at Conway (a bustling seaside community with a famous walled castle), what does she mean? Are they domestic servants who still consider “home” someplace other than their employer’s house? Or do they, like Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* would do in 1847, consider their employer’s house “home”? Or are they laborers who lodge?<sup>28</sup> The raw data from census forms suggests that census-takers often applied the terms ‘lodger’ and ‘boarder’ in “inexplicable” ways, according to Higgs: “In 1841, for example, Abraham and Ruth Prior appear in the census returns with Abraham at the head of the household. In 1851, however, Ruth was described as head with Abraham relegated to the end of the household’s return as ‘lodger.’ In 1861 Abraham

and Ruth reappear as man and wife, with Abraham as the household head. One wonders what Victorian domestic drama was being played out here!<sup>29</sup> Moreover, though there is a mother, there is no father mentioned; is he absent or present? What about the two who have gone to sea? Where will they be counted—on their ship? Rickman specifically excluded “soldiers and sailors found in the parish on the day of inquiry” and one wonders if this figural “impressment” was an endorsement of Royal Navy policy during the Napoleonic Wars.

Asking the maid what her siblings consider “home” would make for a different poem from the one Wordsworth offers. In “We Are Seven,” the maid and the questioner both view the two in Conway and the two at sea as necessarily attached to this family and this cottage. They agree on the definition of brother or sister (a complicated question, given the number of families constituted like the Wordsworths’ neighbors, the Greens of Grasmere, a mish-mash of step-siblings, half-siblings, and children from previous marriages<sup>30</sup>). Neither counts the mother, who is ostensibly present. Both agree on “five” at the minimum, precluding the voice of the two at sea or the two in Conway who may or may not accede to the maid’s “we.” Her “we” is a matter of *gemeinschaft*, or close-knit community, rather than *gesellschaft*, or self-interested society, to use the sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies’s categories.<sup>31</sup> The pathos of the questioner’s insistence that “you are five” resides in his assumption that brothers and sisters are still a group and still tied to the cottage, not in his resistance to acknowledging the presence of the dead. The questioner’s registration of the four living siblings’ presence gratifies the maid and the reader and provides a solid foundation for the contest over “five” and “seven.” Ferguson observes: “Had the girl said, “We were seven,” or some version of “my parents had seven children,” her statement would have been unexceptionable.”<sup>32</sup> In the context of census debates, however, the statement has far more ideological weight: who is to be counted as dwelling with the maid?

The questioner identifies his interlocutor as a “cottage girl,” transforming the noun into an adjective and yoking the girl to her dwelling place. By the fourth stanza, his questions suggest a data-collector speaking from a polling form: “Sisters and brothers, little maid, / How many may you be?” The identification of the category precedes his question and he categorizes her as an unmarried female. Because of his stilted phraseology, she checks to make sure she understood the question: “How many? Seven in all,” she said, / And wondering looked at me.” The rhetorical figure in this stanza is the hyperbaton (literally, a walking around or a stepping over): a figure of speech in which the customary or logical order of words or phrases is inverted, usually for the sake of emphasis. The purpose of an hyperbaton is to call attention to the misplaced word—in this case “wondering”—which, with its evocations of “wandering,” with mind untethered, reflects back upon the speaker’s initial wandering and questioning. Perhaps she wonders whether the “you” is second person singular or plural.<sup>33</sup>

The fifth stanza is marked by a conflict of dictions as well as jurisdictions as the maid and the questioner discuss the location of the living siblings. Following item two of Rickman’s schedule, he asks, “And where are they, I pray you tell?” While her anaphoric repetition of

the word “and” teasingly evokes the accounting protocols of census-taking, the girl uses poetic reversal (seven are we), polysyndeton (superabundance of conjunctions), and another hyperbaton: “Conway dwell.” The name “Conway” is itself suggestive (to con, to block the way) and the phrase “two are gone to sea” incorporates the succinct observation that “two are gone.” Does she mean dead? Before the reader can wonder further, the maid reveals the two dead siblings in the sixth stanza: “Two of us in the church-yard lie, / ‘My sister and my brother, / ‘And in the church-yard cottage, I / ‘Dwell near them with my mother.” The hyperbaton in the first line emphasizes the word “lie,” which, in a poem that follows a poem about lying (“Anecdote for Fathers”), should make the reader wonder about her strange ideas of “we”; her complex figures of speech (apposition, anaphora, hyperbaton) throw into doubt her “count.” Who, exactly, is present?

The new sensibility of the late eighteenth century, according to Terry Castle, was a “spectralization”—a blurring of the line between objective and subjective presence.<sup>34</sup> A “new fantasy of continuity,” she writes, was evident in the popularity of “[c]onsolatory literature, grave inscriptions and monuments, and the keeping of mementos of the dead.”<sup>35</sup> Wordsworth recollected in his later years that his conversations with Coleridge on the subject of the supernatural and the imaginative medium provoked his writing “We Are Seven.”<sup>36</sup> *Lyrical Ballads* is peopled with spirits, specters, and characters who dwell on memories of the dead, from the Ancient Mariner to Goody Blake and Harry Gill and the grieving mother in “The Thorn.” Certainly the little maid in “We Are Seven” dwells comfortably alongside them in the volume. Within the poem, she names the two siblings who have died, “little Jane” and “brother John,” but not the others. She eats her supper with them; she dwells on them far more than the four who are away.

Castle argues that the “romantic habit of thought” that privileges the “haunted consciousness” and prefers the phantasmatic to the real, “has strengthened its grip on Western consciousness over the past two centuries.”<sup>37</sup> This habit and Wordsworth’s recollection of the supernatural genesis of “We Are Seven” have made the question of spectral presence central to analyses of the poem. As a result, the political and ideological question of the living siblings’ presence is deemed to be outside its poetic jurisdiction.<sup>38</sup> Scholars of the poem agree that the power of “We Are Seven” emerges from the opposition of two kinds of representational logic: associational, which represents presence in the maid’s count of “we are seven,” and rational, which represents absence in a “real,” bureaucratic, and unimaginative count. Wordsworth’s readers generally observe that the deployment of oppositions gives his poems their rhetorical weight. As William Hazlitt puts it, “In a word, his poetry is founded on setting up an opposition (and pushing it to the utmost length) between the natural and the artificial; between the spirit of humanity, and the spirit of fashion and of the world!”<sup>39</sup>

The issue of the living siblings’ presence remains wholly within the jurisdiction of the poem as defined by the girl’s testimony. Raymond Williams observes, “[i]t is still common to hear an idealisation of settlement, of neighbourhood, as if it were the only reality of community.

In the middle of the twentieth century, T. S. Eliot, defining an idea of a Christian society, could say that ‘on the whole it would appear to be for the best that the great majority of human beings should go on living in the place in which they were born.’<sup>40</sup> Both sides of the debate in Wordsworth’s census poem—the questioner, who claims that “you are five,” and the girl who argues that “we are seven”—would appear to agree.

### III: The Law of Presence

Peter de Bolla argues that the difficulty in resolving Wordsworth’s 1798 poem is partly due to its math: “such an evenhandedness seems to be echoed in the very numeric structures that the poem energizes—the number of lines per stanza (four except in the last, which contains five); . . . the accuracy of number in relation to the size of the family (seven or five?); the age of the girl (eight); the number of steps from the door (twelve—the sum of five and seven)—and in the tension that the oscillation between odd and even generates.”<sup>41</sup> Ferguson notes that the repetition of numbers haunts our recollection of the poem, suggesting that the incessant questioning of the speaker (which drives the narrative) will always be at war with the child—“whose attachment to her dead siblings reveals the way in which the passions operate to erase time so that the memory overrides the present, and the past is always now.”<sup>42</sup>

In the official realm, people are either present or absent but not both (except perhaps in the case of “missing in action”); in literature, however, the representation of simultaneous absence and presence (or multiple presences) is business as usual. The representation of beings who are more-than, less-than, or sometimes human is on some level the very object of art, literature, and mythology. A Western genealogy of these representations might include Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, E. T. A. Hoffman’s tales, and most of Stephen King’s novels. But the literature of spectral presence almost always acknowledges the strangeness of these presences. Their existence is not normalized by the texts that generate them; their presence in a particular locale, however, almost always is. As a literary rule, ghosts haunt specific houses and don’t move away.

The goal of the first British census (and all since) was to count each individual in his or her residence. As “We Are Seven” demonstrates, privileging “higher” truth over the general, operative truth of bureaucratic representation is a conventionally Romantic gesture, but it is dependent upon a pre-existing law of official representation. Acknowledging the imprecision of census taking as an enumerator of presence as well as of the often purely ideological relationship between an individual and his/her presence in a “home” ought to collapse the tension-creating opposition in “We Are Seven.” The fact that it doesn’t reveals the strength of the conventions asserted by the poem. That is to say, if Wordsworth’s poem simply asserted that census taking is often arbitrary, there would be no argument over the official enrollment of apparitions and romantic traces.

A similarly romantic census poem, Robert Frost’s “The Census-Taker” (1923) resists the social conservatism of “We Are Seven” even as it evokes the melancholy of Goldsmith’s

"The Deserted Village." "The Census-Taker" opens with a speaker, a census-taker, arriving at a kind of barracks in a hundred-square-mile wasteland, only to find that the dwelling is empty. The speaker travels through the deserted building, counting "one room and one window and one door." He contemplates the discrepancy between the numerical reality (no one is found) and the reality that woodsmen were there quite recently: they lived in the house, ate their meals, slept, and departed when the clearing of the land was finished. Implicit in the census-taker's musings is the reality that the every-ten-year-census count cannot represent the changes that occur between counts. It cannot represent the experience of living that the speaker apprehends. "The Census-Taker" endorses the speaker's "dreamy unofficial counting" as well as his fantasizing about the continued presence of the men who lived in the abandoned dwelling.

Frost, like Wordsworth, engages with the Romantic question of the materiality of vestige: how do you record a trace? Both "The Census-Taker" and "We Are Seven" privilege that which census figures cannot incorporate but can be apprehended with an "inward eye" of refined sensibility: memory, relationship, and spectral presence. Frost's census poem is similar to Wordsworth's not only in its anxiety about "counting" absent persons but also in its sentimentality about "family." One of the few scholars who has focused on "The Census-Taker," William Doeski, writes: "Wordsworth well understood how separately the human imagination stood from nature, but whereas he read nature as the census-taker reads the relics in the cottage, Frost insists almost to a Blakean degree on the primacy of the inhabiting voice as the source of knowledge and insight."<sup>43</sup> While the inhabitants do not really offer information beyond the fact of their recent existence, certainly the speaker appreciates the loggers' communal living arrangement and seems to understand that the men were a family of sorts. They were certainly a household, sharing both labor and dwelling, albeit a functional and utilitarian summer shelter. Arguably these men would have agreed for a time to the pronoun "we."

The official count of "The Census-Taker" — "no men there and no bones of men there" — signals the speaker's final, melancholy decision not to register the ghostly figures that seemed so alive. Written shortly after the First World War, the war in which Frost's close friend, the poet Edward Thomas, was killed, "The Census-Taker" is a stark depiction of land laid waste, of life cut down, of empty barracks and missing limbs. It is an allegory of the battlefields of Europe and the soldiers who lived in makeshift dwellings without women, who cut down other lives, who were maimed, and who are now nowhere to be found.

Bureaucratic census-taking and poetic representation both register some kind of truth, though the object of official representation is merely to enroll material truths and facts, whereas the point of Romantic poetry is transcendental truth. A minor drama of a bureaucratic nature six years after the composition of "We Are Seven" suggests that Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads* co-author did not recognize the poetic potential of census-taking. In March of 1804, as Coleridge was leaving England for Malta, Wordsworth sent Coleridge a letter addressed to 16 Abington Street, Westminster (not knowing that Coleridge had moved to

his friend's James Tobin's lodgings), with a note that a manuscript (several thousand hurriedly copied lines of what would later become known as "The Prelude") would still soon follow. The letter eventually got to Coleridge, who asked Wordsworth to forward the manuscript to Tobin's address. The ever-thrifty Wordsworth, following Coleridge's earlier recommendation, sent the thick manuscript under cover to John Rickman's census office free of charge, for forwarding. Coleridge, receiving a package with Rickman's stamp, almost neglected to open it before he sailed, "supposing its contents related to public affairs."<sup>44</sup> What other conclusion can be drawn but that this poet of the supernatural thought that a census document could not contain poetry?

In "We Are Seven," the poetic speaker's task as an official recorder of the population is deliberately opposed to the romantic and visionary work of the maid's poetic sensibilities. While both register some kind of truth, the object of official representation is enrolling material truths and facts, whereas the object of poetry, as Wordsworth argues in his 1802 Preface, is expressing "truth, not individual and local, but general, and operative; not standing upon external testimony, but carried into the heart by passion."<sup>45</sup> The convention of counting a person as "present" stimulates the narrative of ghostly presence. And this, not surprisingly, is what most readers recall about the poem.

Hollis Robbins

Johns Hopkins University

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Wordsworth & Coleridge Lyrical Ballads 1798*, ed. W. J. B. Owen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 3.

<sup>2</sup> Oliver Goldsmith, *Goldsmith's "The Deserted Village" and Other Poems*, ed. Robert Naylor Whiteford (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1911), 2.

<sup>3</sup> Goldsmith, 7.

<sup>4</sup> D.V. Glass, *The Population Controversy: A Collective Reprint of Material Concerning the 18th Century Controversy on the Trend of Population in England and Wales* (Farnborough: Gregg International Publishers, 1973) [no page numbers].

<sup>5</sup> D.V. Glass, *Numbering the People: The Eighteenth-century Population Controversy and the Development of Census and Vital Statistics in Britain* (Farnborough: Saxon House, 1973), 111–12.

<sup>6</sup> David Hume, "Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations" in *The Scottish Moralists on Human Nature and Society*, ed. Louis Schneider (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967); Robert Wallace, *Dissertation on the Numbers of Mankind in Ancient and Modern Times* (Edinburgh and London: Constable, Hunter, Park, and Hunter, 1809). Though Hume's essay was published first, Wallace's was written first. Hume had read Wallace's manuscript (which had been presented to the Philosophical Society of Edinburgh) prior to the publication of his own essay. Wallace republished Hume's essay as an Appendix.

Wallace argued that the population of those more glorious civilizations was certainly greater; Hume strenuously challenged this position. Both, however, assumed a positive correlation between fertility and national strength.

<sup>7</sup> D. V. Glass, ed. *The Development of Population Statistics. A Collective Reprint of Materials Concerning the History of Census Taking and Vital Registration in England and Wales* (Farnborough: Gregg International Publishers Limited) [no page numbers].

<sup>8</sup> Qtd. in Glass, *Numbering the People*, 20.

<sup>9</sup> For a concise Western history of registration of births and deaths, see John Southerden Burn, *The History of Parish Registers in England 1798–1870* (East Ardsley, England: EP Publishing, 1979), 1–4.

<sup>10</sup> Richard Price “A Review of the Controversy Relating to the State of Population in England and Wales Since the Revolution,” in *Observations on Reversionary Payments and Essays on Different Subjects*, ed. William Morgan (London: T. Caddell and W. Davies, 1812).

<sup>11</sup> In a 1769 letter to Benjamin Franklin, Dr. Price suggested that the increase in London’s population must be due to emigration rather than fertility because the birth and burial records in London seemed to reveal more burials than births. Qtd. in Glass, *The Population Controversy* [no page numbers].

<sup>12</sup> See Orlo Williams, *Lamb’s Friend the Census-Taker: Life and Letters of John Rickman* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1912), 40. Rickman and Wordsworth knew each other, but did not correspond.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Robert Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, ed. Philip Appleman (New York: W.W. Norton, 1976). See Mary Poovey, *A History of the Modern Fact: Problems of Knowledge in the Sciences of Wealth and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), particularly Chapter 6, for a discussion of the “romantic campaign against Malthus” led by Southey and Coleridge and joined by Wordsworth, Thomas De Quincey, and William Hazlitt from 1812 to 1830. See also Aaron Fogel, “Population and Poetry, Number and Name,” *Raritan* (1982), 93–115 for a discussion of poetry and population.

<sup>14</sup> See complete I. F. note, *Lyrical Ballads 1798*, 135–38, as well as the 1800 Preface comments, 158. See also Mary Moorman, *William Wordsworth: A Biography. The Early Years, 1770–1803* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957), 384, in which Moorman writes: “Wordsworth’s aim in writing this poem was to show ‘the perplexity and obscurity which in childhood attend our notion of death, or rather our utter inability to admit that notion.’ He had himself experienced that ‘utter inability.’”

<sup>15</sup> Frances Ferguson, *Solitude and the Sublime: Romanticism and the Aesthetics of Individuation* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 146.

<sup>16</sup> Glass, *Numbering the People*, 18.

<sup>17</sup> By contrast, United States Marshals, who conducted the 1790 United States Census, were required by law to visit every household and inquire about the head of the family and the number of persons in each household. Individuals were categorized as Free White males 16 years and older, Free White males under 16, Free White females, all other free persons (by sex and color), and slaves. The aggregate numbers for each district were required to be posted publicly. See *200 Years of Census Taking: Population and Housing Questions, 1790–1990* (Washington, D.C.: Bureau of the Census, 1989).

<sup>18</sup> Glass, *Development of Population Statistics*, 1973 [no page numbers].

<sup>19</sup> See Elaine Scarry, *Literature and the Body: Essays on Populations and Persons*, ed. Elaine Scarry (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988).

<sup>20</sup> The passage in Luke 2.3–5 reads in full: “And all went to be enrolled, each to his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child.”

<sup>21</sup> Susan Wolfson, *The Questioning Presence: Wordsworth, Keats, and the Interrogative Mode in Romantic Poetry* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 50.

<sup>22</sup> See W. A. Armstrong, "The Census Enumerators' Books: A Commentary," in *The Census and Social Structure: An Interpretative Guide to Nineteenth Century Censuses for England and Wales*, ed. Richard Lawton (London; Totowa, N.J.: F. Cass, 1978), 48–49. Remarkably, as Armstrong writes, the national ratio of persons per inhabited house (about 5.6) remained stable in the first four censuses. But, he continues, "[a]ccustomed as they were to the more traditional usage, we must assume that many enumerators would have entertained doubts as to whether, say, a single woman in a cottage or some other incomplete complement of components could constitute a 'family'" (49).

<sup>23</sup> Armstrong, 49.

<sup>24</sup> Edward Higgs, *A Clearer Sense of the Census* (London: HMSO 1996), 77.

<sup>25</sup> See for example Margaret Russett, "Wordsworth's Gothic Interpreter: De Quincey Personifies 'We Are Seven,'" *Studies in Romanticism* (Vol 30, Fall 1991, 345–65); Alan Bewell, *Wordsworth and the Enlightenment: Nature, Man, and Society in the Experimental Poetry* (New Haven: Yale University Press 1989), 195–96; Maureen N. McLane, *Romanticism and the Human Sciences: Poetry, Population, and the Discourse of the Species* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 53–62. One exception has been Frances Ferguson, who first explored the relationship between Romantic solitude and Malthusian concerns with food supply and population, though not the policy of census-taking per se, in her essay "Malthus, Godwin, Wordsworth, and the Spirit of Solitude," in *Literature and the Body: Essays on Populations and Persons*, ed. Elaine Scarry (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988).

<sup>26</sup> The first U.S. census was conducted in 1790 as stipulated by Article I of the United States Constitution, which reads: "Representatives and direct Taxes shall be apportioned among the several States which may be included within this Union, according to their respective Numbers, which shall be determined by adding to the whole Number of free Persons, including those bound to Service for a Term of Years, and excluding Indians not taxed, three fifths of all other Persons." The "three-fifths" statistic applies to populations, not individual persons. This formula, the result of the Great Compromise during the Constitutional Convention, allowed southern states to "count" the slave population for the purpose of political representation; they were counted at the address of their owners.

<sup>27</sup> *Lyrical Ballads* 1798, 3.

<sup>28</sup> See Richard Lawton, ed. *The Census and Social Structure: An Interpretative Guide to Nineteenth Century Censuses for England and Wales* (London; Totowa, N.J.: F. Cass, 1978), 68. According to Lawton, the enumerators of the first four censuses had been instructed to list boarders who ate together as members of the family, but lodgers who ate separately as separate "families" (Lawton, 68, note 70).

<sup>29</sup> Higgs, 76.

<sup>30</sup> Wordsworth and his sister Dorothy Wordsworth described the complicated family arrangement in a subscription book published to raise money after George and Sarah Green perished in a snowstorm in 1808: "George Green had been twice married, and has left one Son and three Daughters by his first Wife, who do not stand in need of assistance: by her who died with him he has left four Sons and four Daughters; the eldest of these, a Girl fifteen years of age, is at present in service; the second (a Girl likewise) is with a Family who will take care of her, and fit her out when she is also fit for service; one of the Boys will be maintained by his Father's eldest Son, who will breed him up to his own business; so that there remain five Children to be provided for." Dorothy Wordsworth, *The Greens of Grasmere*, ed. E. De Selincourt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936), 2.

<sup>31</sup> Ferdinand Tönnies, *Community and Civil Society* (1887), ed. Jose Harris (Cambridge University Press, 2001). *Gemeinschaft* describes close-knit communities with deep-rooted traditions and associations based on kinship, loyalty, common social mores, and shared personal characteristics (race, ethnicity, religion). Modern society, or *Gesellschaft*, by contrast, is a matter of associations formed for individual self-interest for a variety of practical reasons, such as work, investment, or education.

<sup>32</sup> Ferguson, *Solitude and the Sublime*, 64.

<sup>33</sup> Ferguson, *Solitude and the Sublime*, 164. Ferguson suggests that the poem stages a direct debate on the issue of personification in language. “The possibility for the word ‘you’ to apply in the singular or the plural continues to operate unchecked and strangely undisambiguated” (164). She further suggests that the girl’s “we are seven” might well be another version of “I am seven.”

<sup>34</sup> Terry Castle, “The Spectralization of the Other in The Mysteries of Udolpho,” in *The New Eighteenth Century: Theory, Politics, English Literature*, eds. Felicity Nussbaum and Laura Brown (New York: Methuen, 1987).

<sup>35</sup> Castle, “Spectralization,” 246.

<sup>36</sup> “[W]e began to talk of a Volume, which was to consist as Mr. Coleridge has told the world, of Poems chiefly on supernatural subjects [and subjects] taken from common life but looked at, as much as might be, through an imaginative medium. Accordingly I wrote ‘The Idiot Boy;’ ‘Her eyes are wild;’ &c., ‘We are Seven;’ ‘The Thorn’ and some others.” *Lyrical Ballads 1798*, 136.

<sup>37</sup> Castle, “Spectralization,” 251.

<sup>38</sup> In the tenth stanza she tries to convince the census-taker to “count” her dead siblings by counting steps:

‘Their graves are green, they may be seen,’  
The little Maid replied,  
‘Twelve steps or more from my mother’s door,  
And they are side by side.

She has of course already won the argument that her living siblings are present.

<sup>39</sup> William Hazlitt, “On the Spirit of the Age.” *Selected Writings of William Hazlitt*, ed. Jon Cook (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 459. See also Gene Bernstein, “A Structuralist Reading of ‘Anecdote for Fathers’ and ‘We Are Seven.’” *Wordsworth Circle* 10 (1979).

<sup>40</sup> Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York and London: Oxford University Press), 84.

<sup>41</sup> Peter, De Bolla, *Art Matters* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 104.

<sup>42</sup> Frances Ferguson, *Wordsworth: Language as Counter-Spirit* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 67.

<sup>43</sup> See William Doreski, “Robert Frost’s ‘The Census-Taker’ and the Problem of Wilderness,” *Twentieth-Century Literature* (Vol. 34, Spring 1988, 30–39), 38.

<sup>44</sup> Ernest De Selincourt, ed. *Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: Early Years* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), 459n.

<sup>45</sup> *Lyrical Ballads 1798*, 166.