

Zeitschrift: Études de Lettres : revue de la Faculté des lettres de l'Université de Lausanne
Herausgeber: Université de Lausanne, Faculté des lettres
Band: - (1993)
Heft: 3

Artikel: "Fear of numbers" : Wordsworth, Hazlitt and Malthus
Autor: Piette, Adam
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-870510>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 10.01.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

“FEAR OF NUMBERS”: WORDSWORTH, HAZLITT AND MALTHUS

Cette étude examine les relations entre l'écriture des auteurs romantiques anglais et la publication de l'œuvre de Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population* sur la surpopulation. L'écriture est en grande partie un jeu et un enjeu de l'espace imaginaire. En écrivant, on entre dans un territoire circonscrit et créé par la parole. L'œuvre de Malthus a provoqué une espèce de claustrophobie de l'esprit dans ses lecteurs, qui a ensuite influencé l'écriture même et ses espaces fictifs.

In the summer of 1828, William Whewell and George Airy were trying to determine the density of the earth at the bottom of Dolcoath copper mine, 1,200 feet below the surface. Wordsworth wrote to Whewell later that year and jokingly referred to Athanasius Kircher's seventeenth century treatise *Mundus Subterraneus*, hoping Whewell might be able to add to Kircher's list of fabulous subterranean animals:

A Subject eminently important to naturalists, and not indifferent to Poets, who are much at a loss how to do these things correctly, e.g. as one of the body I should like to know whether the figure of the Dragon delineated page 117 Edit. Amsterodami 1678 is to be depended upon, also, (and here Mr Malthus and the population men are mightily concerned) whether any notices occurred tending to confirm the grave affirmatives of the next page, that a certain unfortunate who had fallen into a den of these Monsters from which there was no escape, was able to live comfortably for six winter months by licking the stony sides of the Cavern after the Example of its hideous Occupants. — On the return of Spring it appears that this Stone-licker ... escaped by one of the said Dragons having allowed him to lay hold of his tail, a degree of good nature not to be expected I suppose but on the recurrence of the genial season.¹

1. William WORDSWORTH, *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, III, 1821-1828, ed. Ernest de Selincourt, Oxford: Clarendon, 1978 (2nd ed.). To William Whewell, 4 Dec. 1828, *Letters* III, p. 682.

At the heart of this laborious joke lies Wordsworth's play with relations between science and poetry. Wordsworth pretends to seek confirmation of poetic fabling from scientists, thus measuring the distinct interests of science and poetry with a mock show of incapacity ("much at a loss how to do these things correctly"). This is the unstated reason behind the introduction of Malthus and the population men into the story. The Kircher text may have given Wordsworth the Malthusian joke with its "famen" and "vitam sine alimentis",² but the Malthusians are primarily there as part of the scientific community occupying the same *space* as the poets, the space of the earth, the land, mountains and natural sustenance. Whewell down a mine is meddling with the very stuff of Wordsworth's visions of nature. Malthus' proof of overpopulation was threatening to crowd out the inner landscape. Wordsworth makes a show of recoiling back from demographic statistics and earth density experiments to the fabulous geography of Kircher's poetic science.

The illustrations Wordsworth refers to in his letter consist in an aerial view of Lake Lucerne and surrounding mountains, the man flying holding the dragon's tail, and a claustrophobic picture of the same man defending himself from the dragon in a narrow space.³ These two images might stand as frontispieces to my argument concerning the effects of Malthus' writings on the poets of the period. The first might represent the poetic command writing can conjure over landscape; the second the threat posed within the imagination by Malthus' *An Essay on the Principle of Population*.

By writing, we create space, not only in black and white upon the page, but imaginary space, imaginative space, the space of fiction. Child psychologists have been discovering how important this space is in child's play: "L'activité ludique agit également sur la connaissance sensible des lieux, en transformant les espaces réels en espaces de fiction", writes Liliane Lurçat,⁴ who goes on to describe the local maps created by each child,⁵ coordinating the space "de nos représentations, de nos fictions, de

2. Athanasius KIRCHER, *Mundus Subterraneus*, Amsterdam, 1678, p. 118.

3. *Idem*, p. 117.

4. Liliane LURÇAT, *Espace vécu et espace connu à l'école maternelle*, Paris: ESF, 1982, p. 71.

5. *Idem*, p. 109.

nos souvenirs".⁶ Writing as such repeats the topographical games of child's play, mapping out inner spaces, combining with the places of the external world to create memory *topoi*, at constant work finding room for thought, shaping language into habitable environment.⁷

Wordsworth wrote himself all over the Lake District, the district of his mind's conscious making of itself. Within its physical coordinates, writing became for him a life of the poet's soul as blended history of earth and mind, two interactive powers.⁸ "The ghostly language of the ancient earth"⁹ gave him the visionary power to name its places and create the private space of the imagination, "my other home, / My dwelling, and my out-of-doors abode",¹⁰ coextensive with "these lines, this page",¹¹ "the very words which I have here / Recorded".¹²

The "here" of the poet's very words is situated at the place named the "green fields" of Nature,¹³ simultaneously the "open fields" of writing:

...the very words which I have here
Recorded. To the open fields I told
A prophesy; poetic numbers came
Spontaneously, and clothed in priestly robe
My spirit, thus singled out, as it might seem,
For holy services.

1805 *Prelude*, 2, 58-63

6. *Idem*, p. 54.

7. Cf. Gaston BACHELARD, *La Poétique de l'espace*, Paris: PUF, 1957, p. 11: "l'image isolée, la phrase qui la développe, le vers ou parfois la strophe où l'image poétique rayonne, forment des *espaces de langage*." Also Maurice BLANCHOT, *L'Espace littéraire*, Paris: Gallimard, 1955, p. 258: "pur Dehors".

8. Cf. Alan BEWELL, *Wordsworth and the Enlightenment*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989, p. 238 *et passim*, for an excellent discussion of the interaction of the "environmental influence" (nature on the human mind) and the "geographical agency" (human transformation of nature) underpinning these two histories.

9. William WORDSWORTH, *The Prelude: 1799, 1805, 1850*, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth, M.H. Abrams, & Stephen Gill, London: Penguin, 1979. 1799 *Prelude*, Part 2. 358

10. William WORDSWORTH, *The Poetical Works of Wordsworth*, London: Warne, 1905, 161, "It was an April morning", l. 40-41.

11. *Idem*, 1799 *Prelude*, Part 2, 384.

12. *Idem*, 1805 *Prelude*, Book I, 59-60.

13. *Idem*, 1805 *Prelude*, Book I, 2.

The function conferred by the priestly robe is a peculiar one, though. The poet becomes the "presiding genius" of his elected landscape, with pastoral duties towards its inhabitants, custodial responsibilities towards its topographical features and supernatural capacities to summon up the region's powers. The "poetic numbers" demarcate their own "open fields" and, *by so doing*, define poetic power. The poet needs natural space because it is the condition of the possibility of writing with any *breadth* of vision at all.

This article will be looking at the effect of the publication of Malthus' hugely influential study and its subsequent controversy on those open fields of writing, on poetic numbers themselves. It might also be the story of how a presiding genius, through increasing fear of numbers, becomes a country squire :

Later visitors sometimes commented on his resemblance to a hale country squire, and although his share of the local property was small he became something of an arbiter of taste in the neighbourhood—a rôle which, we might say, mediated there between the doubtful sublimity of his private status as lonely, uncommunicating poet living away from the community and the banality of his involvement in local public affairs as Distributor of Stamps. When he and his family moved to Rydal Mount he not only laid out a terrace for his own composing but raised levels in order to improve the views, introduced a pool of fish, and, most dramatic of all, constructed a summer house which would surprise the visitor at a strategic point.¹⁴

The "raised levels" may have given him an illusory sense of matter-of-fact domination over the landscape he once flew over in his mind, the terrace may have compensated for the open fields of his younger composing, the strategic point of the summer house an entertaining version of his "cloistral place/Of refuge"¹⁵, but one senses a sizeable shrinking in the breadth of the geographical area of the mind, the spots of time reconverted into tasteful residence.

One cause of this change must have been the burden borne by his imagination in the form of one of the holy services demanded

14. John BEER, *Wordsworth and the Human Heart*, London: Macmillan, 1978, p. 206.

15. Wordsworth, *Poetical Works*, 164, "When to the attractions of the busy world", l. 11-12.

by poetic numbers: responsibility for human numbers. As Wordsworth put it in the second edition of the *Preface*:

[The poet] is the rock of defence of human nature; an upholder and preserver, carrying everywhere with him relationship and love. In spite of differences of soil and climate, of language and manners, of laws and customs, in spite of things silently gone out of mind, and things violently destroyed, the poet binds together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society, as it is spread over the whole earth, and over all time.

p. 324-25

Against the global warmth of the humanitarian ideal, he ranges cultural differences, misplaced radicalism and human violence. The pressure is on the grandiose phrase, and the adjectives "vast" and "whole" magnify the difficulty of the holy service. Wordsworth has read Malthus, and it has changed his vision of the earth.

Wordsworth would have known about Malthus' essay the very year the first version was published. *An Essay on the Principle of Population, as it Affects the Future Improvement of Society*, 1798, as the title suggests, was written against utopian writing influenced by the French Revolution, in particular sections of the work of Condorcet and Godwin.¹⁶ Using arguments partly gleaned from Adam Smith,¹⁷ Hume¹⁸ and Robert Wallace,¹⁹ Malthus argued that

the power of population is indefinitely greater than the power of the earth to produce subsistence for man. Population, when unchecked, increases in a geometrical ration. Subsistence increases

16. In particular, his essay "Of Avarice and Profusion", Essay II of *The Enquirer: Reflections on Education, Manners and Literature* (1797).

17. "Every species of animal naturally multiplies in proportion to the means of their subsistence, and no species can ever multiply beyond it" (1776 *Wealth of Nations*, quoted in Thomas Robert MALTHUS, *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, ed. Philip Appleman, New York & London: Norton, 1976, p. 6).

18. 1752, *Discourse X*, "Of the Populousness of Antient Nations": "it seems natural to expect, that wherever there are most happiness and virtue and the wisest institutions, there will also be most people" (Appleman, 3).

19. *A Dissertation on the Numbers of Mankind in Antient and Modern Times* (1753): "the number of people in every country depends greatly on its political maxims and institutions concerning the division of lands." (Appleman, 4). Hazlitt was to use this source repeatedly as a weapon against Malthus, charging him with plagiarism and distortion of Wallace's optimism about population growth.

only in an arithmetical ratio. A slight acquaintance with numbers will shew the immensity of the first power in comparison of the second.²⁰

The two "fixed laws of our nature" (p. 19), need for food and sexual passion, are dangerously at odds with one another if unchecked, for the same nature

has been comparatively sparing in the room and nourishment necessary to rear [the seeds of life]. The germ of existence contained in this spot of earth, with ample food and ample room to expand in, would fill millions of worlds in the course of a few thousand years. Necessity, that imperious all pervading law of nature, restrains them within the prescribed bounds.

p. 20

In human terms, the checks and restraints contrived by nature are vice and misery, a double law that is unalterable by human agency²¹ and therefore conclusive proof against "the perfectibility of the mass of mankind" (p. 21). Misery will starve the surplus poor or force the lust-driven people to vice, which Malthus defines as "promiscuous intercourse, unnatural passions, violations of the marriage bed, and improper arts to conceal the consequences of irregular connexions".

The principle of population forces the human race right up to the limits of the means of subsistence, and necessarily so, as these are natural laws; any tinkering with God's brutal machine (e.g. Poor Laws) will upset the delicate balance between these coordinates and lead to catastrophe. The superiority of the power of population over the means of subsistence

keeps the inhabitants of the earth always fully up to the level of the means of subsistence, and is constantly acting upon man as a powerful stimulus, urging him to the further cultivation of the earth.

p. 121

These are necessary evils then, with "stimulus" having the same positive value as "competitiveness" in modern economics.

Malthus, to clinch his argument with a cultural cliché, compares this stimulus to the tired equation "starving poet = inspired mind":

20. T. R. Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, p. 20.

21. "No fancied equality, no agrarian regulations in their utmost extent could remove the pressure of it even for a single century." (20).

Want has not unfrequently given wings to the imagination of the poet, pointed the flowing periods of the historian.

p. 119

Loss of room, crowded earth leading to the further cultivation of the earth; poet with the powerful stimulus of hunger rising on the dragon wings of his imagination for a broader view: demography writes geography into a tiny corner, while economics reduces poetics to brutal bodily deprivation.

An indication of the influence of Malthus' stress on room and nourishment can be gleaned from Coleridge's marginal notes to his copy of the essay, which he was reading firstly on Wedgewood's request in 1798 when with Wordsworth in Germany, then again in 1803 to help Southey in his attack on the treatise.²² Coleridge would certainly have talked over the issue with Wordsworth in Germany, considering the obsessiveness of Coleridge's annotations:

let the Productiveness of the Earth be increased beyond the Hope of the most visionary Agriculturalist, still the Productions take up room — if the present crop of Turnips occupy one fifth of the space of the Turnip field, the increase can never be more than quintupled [...] so that supposing a little Island of a single Acre, and its productions occupying one fifth of its absolute space, and sufficient to maintain two men and two women, four generations would outrun its *possible* power of furnishing them with Food.²³

The central fact of Malthus' essay was *conceded* by Coleridge as a self-evident truth, presumably in order to dissociate its force from the right-wing implications Malthus drew from it, i.e. the identification of abortion, exposure of children and artificial sterility with Virtue and revolutionary ideals with vicious overpopulation.²⁴ Coleridge, by conceding the fact, is consequently

22. Southey's review of the essay in *Annual Review*, II (1803), p. 292-301.

23. G.R. POTTER, "Unpublished Marginalia in Coleridge's Copy of Malthus' *Essay on Population*", *Publications of the Modern Language Association*, LI (1936), p. 1061-1068, p. 1063-64.

24. Potter, p. 1064. I have no *room* to go into the very important debate among the poets concerning marriage and moral sexual restraint brought on by Malthus' arguments. Suffice it to say that Malthus' essay was felt to menace the fundamental values of love and cohesiveness among the poor and labouring classes with his hidden policy of enforced police restraint, the policy of the "Sow-gelder", as Coleridge and Southey put it (Potter, 1066; letter of Southey to John Rickman, February 8th 1804, in Robert SOUTHEY, *New Letters of Robert*

driven into accepting the way Malthus conceives of physical space: productions take up room, men and women are confined to limited space, and a strange Swiftian fiction is created of the "little Island".

This last move is occasioned by Malthus' rhetorical style: "Let us now take any spot of earth, this Island for instance" (p. 22). England becomes a little island, a mere spot of earth. Malthus' rhetoric has insidiously created a claustrophobia of the imagination in his readers, even among the radicals who ferociously opposed his inferences.

Hazlitt was one of the more forceful of Malthus' opponents, attacking him in a long tract in 1807 "A Reply to the Essay on Population, by the Rev. T.R. Malthus", and later in one of the contemporary portraits in *The Spirit of the Age*, "Mr. Malthus".²⁵ Claustrophobia is a constant tone in Hazlitt's argument: Malthusian demographics lead to the conclusion that:

our only object must be to confine human happiness within as narrow limits and to keep the population down as low as possible, at least to suffer no addition to it. We are something in the condition of a man suspended on a balance with sharp-pointed spikes placed close to his body, and who must not stir for his life.

"Reply", p. 221

Hazlitt, in parodying Malthus' argument, diagnoses the sheer bodily constriction, the claustrophobic imaginary spacelessness his generation felt on reading and absorbing the essay on population. Malthus had created an imaginary England with hordes of starving, copulating beast-men and beast-women invading the pastures green of England's limited space, converting it into a mere spot of earth. Hazlitt enters into Malthus' fictions and takes them to their rhetorical extreme, revealing the lying metaphorical

Southey, ed. Kenneth Curry, New York & London: Columbia University Press, 1965, vol I, 351). Cf. also Wordsworth's letter to Lady Beaumont, July 8th 1831, for a later, more conservative judgement on Malthus, marriage and the poor (letter 623; *Letters*, V, part II 1829-1834, ed. Alan G. Hill, Oxford: Clarendon, 1979 (2nd ed.), p. 405-406.)

25. William HAZLITT, "A Reply to the Essay on Population, by the Rev. T.R. Malthus", in *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P.P. Howe, London: J.M. Dent, 1930-1934, vol.1; and *The Spirit of the Age or Contemporary Portraits*, London: Grant Richards, 1904. Cf. also *Letters* number 36, an answer to a *Political Register* review of his "Reply" (William HAZLITT, *The Letters of William Hazlitt*, ed. Herschel M. Sikes, London: Macmillan, 1979, p. 122-30).

work²⁶ within Malthus' talk of room, nourishment, vice and misery.

Hazlitt later puts the theory of vice and misery to the test, by imagining Malthus himself unleashing these forces on an ideal Godwinian population:

he must suppose either that this extraordinary race of men, in proportion as population increases, are gradually reduced in size, "and less than smallest dwarfs, in narrow room, throng numberless, like that pygmean race beyond the Indian mount, or fairy elves"; or that some new world assigned them as a breeding-place, from which attempting to return they are immediately squeezed to death, like people rushing into a crowded theatre.

"Reply", p. 205

Hazlitt argues forcibly that "it is impossible but they must see and feel that there was only room for a certain number" ("Reply", p. 205); i.e. that normal human beings will not deliberately starve each other to death, that they have ordinary faculties of restraint and communal responsibility. Malthus had had to concede as much to the outraged critics of the first essay, and had introduced *moral restraint* as a supplement to his theory of vice and misery in the 1803 second edition, an edition which, as many argued, gave up his principle but retained his conclusion. But in writing against Malthus' writing, we find Hazlitt himself conceding imaginative ground with his "only room", the "only" admitting Malthus' nightmare crowded theatre and pigmy race as possibilities that may haunt the imagination and govern moral action in a populace.

At one point in the 1803 edition, Malthus had compared the population within a given country to "a man who is locked up in a room": that man "may fairly said to be confined by the walls of it, *though he may never touch them*" ("Reply", p. 213). Hazlitt's riposte is to liken Malthus' imaginary population-man to

that of a man who has a range of a suite of rooms and who in a fit of the spleen, or from indolence, or stupidity, or from any other cause you please, confines himself to one of them, or of a man

26. At one point, Hazlitt attacks Malthus for hurrying "into an unfounded assumption by having his imagination heated with a *personification*" ("Reply", p. 219), the personification being likening the principle of population to "a sort of infant Hercules" which needs strangling in its cradle.

who having hired a large commodious apartment, says, I never make use of the whole of this apartment, I never go within a foot of the walls, I might as well have it partitioned off, it would be snugger and warmer, and so still finding that he does not run against his partition any more than against the wall, should continue, being determined to have no unnecessary spare-room, to hemm himself in closer and closer till at last he would be able to stir neither hand nor foot.

“Reply”, p. 214

In countering Malthus' simile, Hazlitt weaves a comic fiction to rival Beckett with his Murphy. The population-man is translated back into Malthus himself, enwombing himself up in his mad upperclass fiction, blustering about “no spare-room”, childishly snuggling into his self-created nest. But Hazlitt is at the same time registering the gravitational pull of Malthus' scaremongering arguments; his *imagination* is hemmed in by the very terms being argued and written against. Hazlitt's syntax becomes increasingly *close*, relative clauses jostling for room to stretch out in. The simile of the hemmed-in man itself relies, for its irony, on a major concession to Malthus' arguments, that is to say that little island England has colonies for excess population, the “suite of rooms”. In arguing this, Hazlitt admits Malthus' doubts about the room England can possibly provide.

The argument about the colonies, notwithstanding, became the stock response of critics of Malthus and his followers. And it was the response Wordsworth was to adopt in the anti-Malthusian sections of *The Excursion* :

... avaunt the fear

Of numbers crowded on their native soil,
To the prevention of all healthful growth
Through mutual injury! Rather in the law
Of increase and the mandate from above
Rejoice! — and ye have special cause for joy.
For as the element of air affords
An easy passage to the industrious bees
Fraught with their burthens; and a way as smooth
For those ordained to take their sounding flight
From the thronged hive, and settle where they list
In fresh abodes, their labour to renew;
So the wide waters, open to the power,
The will, the instincts, and appointed needs

Of Britain, do invite her to cast off
 Her swarms, and insuccession send them forth
 ... and as days roll on,
 Earth's universal frame shall feel the effect
 Even until the smallest habitable rock,
 Beaten by lonely billows, hear the songs
 Of humanized society²⁷

The principle of population will make the poor into winged colonists, as it has here inspired Wordsworth to dragon flights of patriotic imperialism. In countering Malthus, Wordsworth endorses his primary principle, and helps his culture move into imperial mode, the imperial mode that would eventually solve the problem of the Irish Famine by sitting aside and waiting for the starving to ship themselves to America and the colonies.²⁸

Malthus' influence can be felt in Wordsworth's poetry years before *The Excursion*. In the 1801 letter to Fox, Wordsworth writes "The domestic affections will always be strong amongst men who live in a country not crowded with population, if these men are placed above poverty." The Lake District, he felt, gave the example of a society that escaped Malthusian notions, having both space and room to be solitary within, and yet also boasting a community neither rich nor poor that lived and breathed a life of moral care and ethical fellow-feeling and restraint. But, in his contact with urban life, Wordsworth felt the dangerous claustro-

27. William WORDSWORTH, "The Excursion", *The Poems*, ed. John O. Hayden, London: Penguin, 1977, vol. II, Book 9, l. 363-389. Cf. also the attack on Malthus' inhumane attitude to child mortality among the poor, 8. 281-296.

28. Cormac O'GRADA has called the Irish Famine "Malthusian murder by the invisible hand" (*The Great Irish Famine*, London, Macmillan, 1989, p. 52). A.J.P. TAYLOR, discussing Russell, Wood and Trevelyan and the task-work regime, has written "they were gripped by the most horrible, and perhaps the most universal, of human maladies: the belief that principles and doctrines are more important than lives. They imagined that rules, invented by economists, were as 'natural' as the potato blight." ("Ireland under the Union, I, 1801-70", in *A New History of Ireland*, ed. W.E. Vaughan, Oxford: Clarendon, 1989, vol. V, p. 330). Relief only for the deserving poor, the Gregory clause amendment to the Poor Law which denied relief to tenants of small-holdings (a thinly veiled scheme of robbery and forced emigration), Russell's identification of outdoor relief with encouragement to idleness — all these 1846-47 laissez faire/laissez mourir policies are distinctly Malthusian in prejudice and practice (cf. Kerby A. MILLER, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985, p. 286-296).

phobic effect of Malthus at its keenest. The "deformities of crowded life" (1805 *Prelude* 8. 465) that London gave him the nightmare vision of, its overflowing streets, the mystery of unknown faces (7. 626-629), the "press and danger of the crowd" ("What a hell/For eyes and ears!") (7. 658-659), were no mere impressions of a country bumpkin, but products of an imagination overheated by Malthus' vision of an overpopulated little island.

Below, the open space, through every nook
Of the wide area, twinkles, is alive
With heads ...
 ... Tents and booths,
Meanwhile, as if the whole were one vast mill,
Are vomiting, receiving, on all sides,
Men, Women, three-years' Children, Babes in arms.
Oh, blank confusion! and a type not false
Of what the mighty City is itself
To all except a straggler here and there,
To the whole swarm of its inhabitants²⁹

The open space of writing, alive with heads,³⁰ momentarily, under Malthus' pressure, becomes a closed factory, manufacturing and consuming its own human figurines, the *Excursion*'s swarm of happy bees become a swarm of syllables crowding out the poetic line — line 694 stretching and stretching to accommodate its crowd of little nouns and adjectives.

Kircher's aerial view of Lake Lucerne must have recalled to Wordsworth his own model for *A Guide through the District of the Lakes* :

At Lucerne, in Switzerland, is shewn a Model of the Alpine country which encompasses the Lake of the four Cantons. The Spectator ascends a little platform, and sees mountains, lakes, glaciers, rivers, woods, waterfalls, and vallies, with their cottages, and

29. 1805 *Prelude* Book 7. 663-665; 692-699

30. We expect the enjambement to lead to "stars", prepared for by the common sense to "twinkles"; "heads" retrospectively changes "twinkles" to one of its more restricted meanings "to move to and fro, or in and out, in rapid succession". The *Oxford English Dictionary* quotes this use of the verb, and comments that it refers to "a space filled with moving objects". The wide space of night is reduced to the factory space of a Malthusian mill.

every other object contained in them, lying at his feet an exquisite delight to the imagination ... Something of this kind ... will here be attempted.³¹

Here is the winged presiding genius, overlooking its adopted natural space, the man of imagination and feeling as Spectator of his own geography. And Wordsworth is anxious to keep the crowds out, in the case of the Lake District not the labouring classes, but ignorant gentry crowding the valleys with their tasteless habitations:

The feudal tenure under which the estates are held has indeed done something towards checking this influx of new settlers; but so strong is the inclination, that these galling restraints are endured; and it is probable, that in a few years the country on the margin of them Lakes will fall almost entirely into the possession of the gentry, either strangers or natives.

p. 224

Wordsworth must protect his own space from new settlers, and, to do so, must argue for boundless new and *other* worlds for the settlement of Britain's excess population. For his literary tenure over the landscape his imagination presides over is threatened by "new settlers". The very childishness of the transformations of real space into fictional space which writing involves rely on the existence of open spaces, solitary play and a dream of pure language ("I, a four years' child,/A naked boy, among thy silent pools/... stood alone/A naked savage in the thunder-shower" (1799 *Prelude*, I, 17-26). Malthusian invaders must occupy *another* country's open spaces, leaving Wordsworth alone with the Derwent-voice of poetic power over landscape.

In his poem "When, to the attractions of the busy world", Wordsworth gets lost in a grove of thickly planted trees: "In such perplexed and intricate array,/That vainly did I seek, between their stems,/A length of open space."³² He finds it the next day, on a hoary pathway traced between the trees, "And winding on with such an easy line /Along a natural opening" (p. 47-49). He treads the path alone thinking of his mariner brother John in some distant region on the seas, working for the East India

31. William WORDSWORTH, "A Guide through the District of the Lakes", in *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. W.J.B. Owen & J.W. Smyser, Oxford: Clarendon, 1974 (1835), vol. 2, p. 122-360, p. 170-71.

32. *Poetical Works*, p. 34-35.

Company. He has before his eyes "Grasmere's peaceful lake,/ And one green island"(p. 90-91) and hears the fir-grove murmur "with a sea-like sound" (p. 103). A moment of sympathy with his brother is born, transforming the Lake District into a visionary colonial scene, the little island in England into the islands served by the East India Company. The length of open space, created by his easy line of poetry, is the "dream-like sight" (p. 94) of the solitary new worlds across the wide waters,³³ ready for all those "Men, Women, three-years' Children, Babes in arms", to free him and his district from fear of numbers and their "perplexed and intricate array".

Adam PIETTE

33. The imagination, at a crucial point in the *Prelude*, is equated with the capacity to see "a new world" (1805 *Prelude*, Book 12. 371). Malthus approved of colonies, of course: "plenty of room and food", he wrote, with the thumping simplicity of a caveman (*An Essay*, p. 43).