

# Grasmere 2013

Selected Papers from the Wordsworth Summer Conference

compiled by  
Richard Gravil

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# Grasmere, 2013

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SELECTED PAPERS FROM  
THE WORDSWORTH SUMMER CONFERENCE  
AT RYDAL HALL

COMPILED BY RICHARD GRAVIL ON BEHALF OF  
THE WORDSWORTH CONFERENCE FOUNDATION

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## Foreword

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This selection of three lectures and eight papers from the 42nd Wordsworth Conference is the sixth such to be published on behalf of the Wordsworth Conference Foundation.

It opens with Heidi Thomson's new approach to Wordsworth's Salisbury Plain poetry, emphasising the domestic rather than the Gothic, and closes with Deirdre Coleman's fascinating research on the Keats Circle's response to India. In a third keynote lecture, Christopher Simons recovers the personal poetry running through 'Ecclesiastical Sketches'. Also on Wordsworth, Peter Larkin pursues Wordsworth in the city with his customary finesse; Tom Clucas considers how Wordsworth's Cumbrian characters are dignified by association with Plutarch's parallel lives; and Rowan Boyson explores his most famous disability, his deficient sense of smell, while Daniel Robinson elucidates some issues in textual editing. Kimiyo Ogawa writes on what 'disinterestedness' in Godwin may owe to Hazlitt, whose philosophical stock is steadily rising, and in two scientific papers, Richard Lansdown introduces James Montgomery's remarkable poem, *Pelican Island*, and Alexandra Paterson writes on Shelley and atmospheric science. Together they give a good sense of the variety and the quality associated with the Wordsworth Summer Conference. An unexpected gap has been plugged by a hastily 'finished' Winter School talk from 2011, on 'Wordsworth's Sacred Sites'.

Richard Gravil, 1 December 2013

*Heidi Thomson*

## **A Perfect Storm: The Nature of Consciousness on Salisbury Plain**

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The Salisbury Plain poems were on Wordsworth's mind for half a century. Stephen Gill starts off his Cornell edition of these poems with this brief chronology: 'In 1793 and 1794, partly as a result of experiences while wandering over Salisbury Plain, Wordsworth composed the poem he called *Salisbury Plain*. Between 1795 and 1799 this work was transformed into the more ambitious *Adventures on Salisbury Plain*.... In 1841 he returned to this early work and revised it for publication in 1842 as *Guilt and Sorrow*' (xv). My focus in this talk will be primarily on the mental adventures of the long suffering Sailor turned murderer in *Adventures on Salisbury Plain*, the story which embeds the narrative of *The Female Vagrant*. The importance of the Sailor's inner life is affirmed by the 1842 title in which paired emotions are juxtaposed with casual occurrences: *Guilt and Sorrow; or, Incidents upon Salisbury Plain*. Wordsworth's poem *Resolution and Independence* gives us a similar twin pairing of emotions in a poem which started off as *The Leech Gatherer*. During the course of that poem the speaker's encounter with the Buddhist leech gatherer prompts him to rephrase the question about purposeful labour 'What kind of work is that which you pursue' (263, l. 95) into the existential query 'How is it that you live, and what is it you do' (264, l. 126). Similarly, *Adventures on Salisbury Plain* provides the opportunity for a range of questions which may complicate our view of the characters involved.<sup>1</sup>

In *Adventures on Salisbury Plain* we witness a transition from

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1 For readings of the Salisbury Plain poems, see primarily Averill, Bailey, Fosso, Gill (*Wordsworth's Revisitations*), Gravid, Hartman, Jones, Modiano, Potkay, Sheats, Swann, Trott, Ulmer, Wiley.

fugitive entrapment into a state of enlightenment. What that enlightenment consists of relates to the guilt for the murder which the Sailor has committed, but it also incorporates the sorrow of the Sailor's fundamental loss, the loss of his family. Most readings emphasize the Sailor's conscientious awareness of guilt as opposed to his mere submission to the operations of the judicial system. The discussion as to whether the Sailor goes to his execution because he has been betrayed into doing so or because he fully realizes that this is the price he has to pay for his crime revolves around the characterization of the Sailor as a murderer. A similar contrast is suggested by the difference between the translated titles of Dostoyevski's great novel: we think of Raskolnikov differently if we read his narrative under the banner of *Crime and Punishment* (in English) than if we consider it under the heading of *Guilt and Repentance* (as you would in the older Dutch and German translations).

Without discarding readings with an ethical emphasis, I will read *Adventures on Salisbury Plain* in terms of the Sailor's most grievous loss, the loss of his wife and family, and how the realization of that loss through a process of physical trances amounts to the loss of his own life. The convergence of justice, conscience, and, I add, overwhelming consciousness of loss within the poem reminds me of a perfect storm, in which the calamitous outcome through 'a rare combination of adverse ... factors' (*OED*) is offset by an earlier use of the phrase, in a 1718 quotation by Hubert Stogdon, a Presbyterian minister: 'There was a rushing mighty wind, a perfect storm, and tempest before the descent of the Holy Ghost' (*OED*). In *Adventures on Salisbury Plain* the rise and fall of the storm coincides with the turbulent behaviour of the Sailor's body which, in successive trances, expresses and rehearses the loss of life he has experienced and will experience. He dies before he dies, in the same sense that Wallace Stevens writes in the final part of 'Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird': 'It was evening all afternoon. / It was snowing / And it was going to snow' (76). In his essay 'On Chaucer and Spenser' Hazlitt defines the strength of Spenser, who presides strongly over the Salisbury Plain poems, as follows: 'His strength ... is not strength of will or action, of bone and muscle, nor is it coarse and palpable—

but it assumes a character of vastness and sublimity seen through the same visionary medium, and blended with the appalling associations of preternatural agency' (203). Wordsworth manages to graft this effect on the Sailor whose body is subject to fits, trances, and tremors. Moreover, Wordsworth incorporates those events into a vision of the Sailor's purpose and direction.

When Coleridge reminisces fondly about the recitation of *Salisbury Plain* in *Biographia Literaria* he also includes a meteorological element when he refers to 'the union of deep feeling with profound thought' and singles out 'above all the original gift of spreading the tone, the *atmosphere*, and with it the depth and height of the ideal world around forms, incidents, and situations, of which, for the common view, custom had bedimmed all the lustre, had dried up the sparkle and the dew drops' (*BL*, 1.80). Coleridge's use of 'atmosphere' here is invoked as an early example of the figurative use of the word in the *OED* in which the whole body of terrestrial air is extended into a 'prevailing psychological climate', 'a pervading tone or mood'. In *Adventures on Salisbury Plain* the effect of the Sailor's suicidal vision accompanies the moral purpose of justice, and the profound thought which underlies the deep feeling is the awareness that life is not worth living without 'the things worth living for'. The Female Vagrant says as much when she talks about the 'dreadful price of being to resign / All that is dear *in being*' (*ASP*, 137, ll. 379–380), but Wordsworth uses the actual phrase, 'the things worth living for', in the 1797 *Argument for Suicide* (included as an Appendix in the Cornell edition of *The Borderers*) which ends on: 'strange it is / And most fantastic are the magic circles / Drawn round the thing called life – till we have learned / To prize it less we ne'er shall learn to prize / The things worth living for.—' (811). In the manuscript the last phrase is repeated below the lines, by itself, in pencil. The Sailor's full realization of the 'things worth living for, is intimated by the reactions of his body at crucial moments in the poem, and most strikingly in reaction to the Female Vagrant's tale.

I agree with Richard Gravil who refers to the Sailor's execution by the justice system as 'self-chosen' (254). My focus is on how that choice is revealed to the Sailor himself, and how it is a choice which