Lyric Over-Hearing: Wordsworth’s Intent to Steal

A slumber did my spirit seal,
I had no human fears:
She seemed a thing that could not feel
The touch of earthly years.

No motion has she now, no force;
She neither hears nor sees;
Rolled round in earth’s diurnal course,
With rocks, and stones, and trees!¹

‘A slumber did my spirit steal, /I had no human fears.’ Given that Wordsworth’s celebrated lyric is suspended in its entirety above this essay, there is a decent chance that you, reader, will have noticed the typographical error in that opening quotation: a slumber did my spirit steal. Then again, perhaps not. Exactly that typo, or misquotation, or mishearing, or misremembering, has proven to be a surprisingly pervasive one, and the poem has been accidentally made into one about stealing by readers both relatively unfamiliar with Wordsworth and those very familiar indeed. Speaking only to those who teach Romanticism, I could likely leave off at anecdote – certain as it is that anyone with experience teaching the poem will have heard it mislabeled, or else misquoted it themselves. But evidence beyond the anecdotal is within easy reach. Bedraggled pre-university students of poetry looking for help, and not hindrance, in engaging with the English canon might turn to the website Enotes, where they will find an analysis that begins ‘A slumber did my spirit steal.’² That same formulation is on the contents page of volume two of Ernest de Sélincourt’s Poetical Works of Wordsworth as it appears in its current digital format on the Oxford University Press website (the print original has ‘seal’), and it’s there in Richard Holmes’s majestic retelling of Coleridge’s relationship with Wordsworth in Coleridge: Early Visions.³ E. M. Forster repeated it when making the point that ‘it does not matter who wrote “A slumber did my spirit steal”, and the same formulation survived across four editions of
The Oxford Companion to English Literature from 1932 to 1967. When in 1935 the Washington Post published the poem, as verses ‘Out of the Past,’ the newspaper likely contributed to future confusion by writing ‘steal’ in place of ‘seal’ in both headlined title and first line (Fig. 1). It’s hard to speak with certainty about when the poem was first mistitled, but it does appear to be a product of the rise of professional literary criticism more than one of editing. The major nineteenth-century editions of Wordsworth’s poetry don’t print that mistake, but it’s there in an entry on ‘How to Read Wordsworth’ in the periodical Queries in 1888, as well as in The Nature and Elements of Poetry in 1892 and the Manual of English Literature of 1894, amongst a good deal of other late Victorian examples. Thus the proliferation of ‘A slumber did my spirit steal’ rose with the discipline of literary studies, and by 1913 it was entirely possible for Egerton Smith to write a chapter on types of rhyme that began by quoting Wordsworth’s lyric in full, with that crucial rhyme word ‘steal’. Part of the more recent strain of confusion has no doubt stemmed from the fact that the joint volume of Wordsworth’s and Coleridge’s poetry known as the ‘Christabel Notebook’, which contained the now missing manuscript of ‘A slumber’, was until November 2020 catalogued...
online as having once held ‘A slumber did my spirit steal’. Then there are the peer-reviewed scholarly articles that quote it as ‘steal’, either in passing or, occasionally, during sustained commentaries on Wordsworth’s sequence of lyrics known as the ‘Lucy’ poems. Perhaps the most high-profile of these is ‘Destroying Literary Studies’, the well-known polemic by René Wellek. Some of these in particular display the deceptive character of Wordsworth’s title. Even as he explains the source of Thomas Hardy’s ‘ere slumber their senses could seal’, Tim Armstrong refers to the line as ‘A slumber did my spirit steal’. And Claire Colebrook’s restatement of a hypothetical “text” that seems to have magically appeared with no reference to any human intent, a thought experiment originally posed by Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels, actually reads a little differently due to its mistitling: ‘picture walking along a beach and finding “A Slumber Did My Spirit Steal” inscribed in the sand; and then imagine, more implausibly still, that a wave washes away those lines to reveal the next line of the poem’. Several modern academic monographs have repeated the same spelling in reference to Wordsworth, and yet more refer to ‘A slumber did my spirit steal’ in their indexes. As recently as February 2020, David García refers to ‘A slumber did my spirit steal’ in a review of James Robert Woods’s Anecdotes of Enlightenment. As typographical errors, or mishearings, or unchecked expectations go — whichever it may be — this one has stolen itself into the minds of many readers and there remained as alternative canon.

Wherefore the insistence of this misidentification? There’s the grammar of the line, for starters. It’s remarkably unclear how the poem wants us to handle that initial inversion — *a slumber did my spirit seal* — meaning we could equally read it as being about a slumber that was sealed by a spirit, or a spirit sealed by a slumber. There’s a sense of a Germanic influence on the syntax here, and Wordsworth did write it in Goslar, as he struggled to come to terms with the German language himself. Regardless, having read the poem through in its entirety, we are scarcely in a better position to say what either version might mean. ‘Stealing a slumber’ makes a kind of intuitive sense: the action of catching forty winks, or stealing a nap, seems consonant with the dreamscapes associated with Romantic lyricism. M. D. Walhout, in an article on the poem’s first line, exhaustively catalogues a rich poetic tradition of eighteenth-century sealed slumbers (‘Till slumber seal’d his weeping eyes’), noting that Wordsworth steps outside of tradition by making it spirit, and not a pair of eyes, that becomes sealed. The funny thing is that Walhout’s method, of enumerating literary precedents, can also be employed to make the case that Wordsworth had stealing in
mind, and not sealing. Consider: ‘Or if a Slumber steal upon my Eyes’ (Dryden), ‘And pleasing slumber steal upon his eyes’ (Pope), ‘And softer slumbers steal her cares to rest’ (Darwin), ‘That steals their Slumbers from my weary Eyes’ (Leapor), ‘Lest Slumber steal one moment o’er thy Soul’ (Young), or countless other examples.¹⁶ Not only is there a clear poetic tradition of pairing slumber with stealing as well as with sealing – to the point of it being a cliché – but it’s notable that that verb, in such formulations, is used to mean both ‘to move by stealth’ and ‘to take away’. Yet more surprising is the fact that Wordsworth himself had already used a very similar formulation prior to the Lyrical Ballads, in the verses now published as ‘Written in Very Early Youth’: ‘Dark is the ground; a slumber seems to steal/O’er vale, and mountain, and the starless sky’ (5–6). Here slumber is very clearly able to ‘steal’, in the sense of it moving stealthily across the landscape and sky. That surprising parallel suggests that to Wordsworth’s ears, too, it was an easy trip from ‘seal’ to ‘steal’, and it begs the question as to how much the later line was actually supposed to echo the former. Paul H. Fry, who ranks amongst the critics who have taken note of the readerly tendency to lip ‘steal’ over ‘seal’, offers an insight into this kind of verbal slippage in critical reading: ‘Misreading is elegy. When we misread “A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal” as “A Slumber Did My Spirit Steal”, our misreading predicts and mourns the death of Lucy more quickly than Wordsworth’s title does’.¹⁷ We experience ‘seal’ as ‘steal’, in short, because we expect to find Lucy stolen away. Peter de Bolla goes further still, noting the ‘pressure or pulsion’ in the ‘t’ of ‘spirit’ which ‘seems to infect, colonize, or appropriate the word which follows, “seal”’.¹⁸ In De Bolla’s analysis, there’s a ghostly trace of ‘spirit’ in ‘seal’, one with the power to produce what he characterises as that ‘phantom’ word which has haunted so many professional readings of Wordsworth’s poem. The result is a sense of loss before loss is yet described: ‘it is’, as De Bolla writes, ‘as if something has been stolen before the poem gets started’ (57).

The discovery of this much misheard word should invite pause for thought. After all, ‘A slumber did my spirit seal’ is already the site of a well-known conflict over critics who hear too much in a poem’s words. In a lecture on ‘Overinterpreting Texts’, Umberto Eco offers a now-infamous critique of the following passage from a now-infamous reading of Wordsworth’s poem by Geoffrey Hartman:

the power of the second stanza resides predominantly in the euphemistic displacement of the word “grave” by an image of gravitation (“Rolled round in earth’s diurnal course”). And though there is no agreement on the tone of this stanza, it is clear that a subvocal
word is uttered without being written out. It is a word that rhymes with “fears” and “years” and “hears,” but which is closed off by the very last syllable of the poem: “trees.” Read “tears” and the animating, cosmic metaphor comes alive, the poet’s lament echoes through nature as in pastoral elegy. “Tears,” however, must give way to what is written, to a dull yet definitive sound, the anagram “trees.”

Eco’s response to Hartman was originally given as a lecture, but even in the prose you can hear weariness in the voice that notes that “tears” is not the anagram of “trees.” It’s in that difference between anagram and almost-anagram that we find one of the limits of interpretation that so concern Eco: ‘If we want to prove that a visible text A is the anagram of a hidden text B, we must show that all the letters of A, duly reorganized, produce B. If we start to discard some letters, the game is no longer valid.’ When our reading is not valid, we are thus ‘over’ interpreting – pushing too far in our search after textual truth and fabricating those truths for ourselves. Such an exercise may well be ‘at least charming’, Eco concedes, but it will never be ‘fully convincing’. What Hartman is up to might in one sense be thought of as a kind of attentive listening in to the text, but the strong suspicion is that Eco does indeed think of it as the very ‘least’ a critic can do.

Jonathan Culler, in a response to the published version of Eco’s lecture, is more sanguine in his assessment of Hartman: Hartman’s essay, whilst perhaps not fully illuminating the Wordsworth poem at hand, gives an example of that most basic critical tenet, a ‘literary sensibility or sensitivity’. It’s sensitive, that is, to the possibilities of interpretive reading, and not to the rules of the anagram. Hartman’s essay is, after all, a reflective exercise that is concerned with the limits of criticism in its own way; its title, ‘The Interpreter’s Freud’, foregrounds precisely the fact it is concerned with the truths that are generated when pre-established theoretical apparatus makes contact with text, and not with questions of intentionality. But there are doubtless also readers who will be largely, if not ‘fully’, convinced by Hartman’s hearing of ‘tears’ in ‘trees’, given its context within ‘A slumber did my spirit seal’. The misspelt anagram, if we’ll permit such a thing, does indeed pick up force by rhyming back to ‘fears’ and ‘years’, both of which are, like ‘trees’, sat in b-rhyme positions. What’s more, ‘fears’, ‘years’, and ‘tears’ all contain ears. So too does ‘hears’, a word used to deny the dead female her living senses, and there are ears too, albeit more subtle ones, in the cognates ‘earth’s’ and ‘earthly’. ‘Earthly years,’ in fact, produces something like the effect that Garrett Stewart calls the ‘transegmental drift’
between the sounds, if not the spellings, of words; we’re encouraged to hear – even if it barely registers on any conscious level – the phrase ‘earthy ears’. What’s going on, then: is this poem listening back at us as we listen in? Or does this profusion of ears – if we do interpret it as something beyond an ordinary product of arbitrary language use – act as a set of signals, as they seemed to do for Blake when he wove the acrostic ‘HEAR’ into London before ending that poem on hearse? It is certainly inviting to think of these ears as prompts for us, as readers, to listen and to hear more closely, as well as to pay attention to what we see: to hear as Hartman heard, or to read as the Edwardian prosodist Saintsbury advocated, with ‘eye-and-ear’ alike and at once. And it’s precisely in the light of such a methodology, of hearing the poem in front of us, that we become more sympathetic to notions like misspelt anagrams – where a shuffling of sounds is more arresting to the senses than is a reconfiguration of letters.

John Stuart Mill’s distinction between rhetoric and poetics is well known: ‘eloquence is heard, poetry is overheard’. Current theorists of the lyric have argued that what Mill appears to have anticipated is the twentieth- and twenty-first-century common wisdom that poems, and especially lyric poems, are all governed by the logic of the Victorian dramatic monologue, which in turn is only a special instance of the lyric. Lyrics, the argument runs, are miniature speech-acts or narrative events, ones that we can (and, in practice, frequently do) begin to understand by first asking the question ‘who is speaking?’; in Mill’s idiom, that question is ‘who are we over-hearing?’ Regardless of our position on the question of lyric’s narrative or non-narrative status, that last question is an arresting one, in terms of what it gets at in poetry. One definition of ‘overhearing’, after all, directly concerns that old bugbear, intentionality: to overhear, ‘contrary to the intention or without the knowledge of the speaker’. But as the Hartman case suggests, ‘over-hearing’ can carry different weight, too, in terms of hearing too much. It’s such expanded definitions of ‘overhearing’ that concern Lisa Lai-ming Wong in her seminal essay ‘A Promise (Over)Heard in Lyric’, in which she puts pressure on the subjunctive mood of lyric thinking as experienced not once, but again and again – heard too many times, even. This kind of reading is consonant with recent scholarly investigations into the ‘sounds’ of silent texts. Marjorie Perloff and Craig Douglas Dworkin set into motion a renewed interest in poetry’s sounds in a 2009 edited collection that aimed to relegate the sound work of poetry from the sidelines to the mainstream of critical encounters. Angela Leighton’s Hearing Things reconsiders literature itself as an event of hearing, where the silent letters and words on the page are nevertheless sounded
in the act of reading, and where those silent ‘sounds’ become a central part of textual meaning.\textsuperscript{32} And Elizabeth Helsinger is similarly interested in how the ‘peculiar music’ of nineteenth-century verse demands ‘that we experience for ourselves how thought can be set in motion by the sound, touch, and sight of a poem’.\textsuperscript{33} Reading in this tradition, questions arise that perhaps weren’t meant to be heard, and, in the process of attuning our critical ears to texts, we might also hear the background mutterings of Wimsatt and Beardsley, warning us against renewing the fallacy of authorial intention. Hearing, yes; but on whose terms? It could well be that there is something in the sounds of ‘A slumber did my spirit seal’ that has us hear too much. It is this poem, after all, that Laura Mandell turns to when making the case that ‘Wordsworth’s poetry can move the reader from seeing visual to hearing acoustic images by exploiting the very visuality of the printed letter’.\textsuperscript{34} Accepting something of the truth of that assertion, what follows is an investigation of the possibility that ‘A slumber did my spirit seal’ wants to be misheard, and indeed that good interpretation is sometimes an event of over-hearing or hearing too much.

To address the question of whether this ghostly sense of ‘stealing’, which at once compounds elegy and preempts loss in the poem, should be credited to reader or to author, I’m taking a sidelong approach to it, via the question of stealing in other works of the period by Wordsworth. To do so is to read ‘A slumber did my spirit seal’ in the spirit of Hugh Sykes Davies, who sees the poem as autonomous in relation to the other ‘Lucy’ lyrics, but also views it as a formulation of a quintessentially Wordsworthian experience that is traceable across the poems of the 1790s more broadly.\textsuperscript{35} To this extent I’m keeping one eye on authorial intention, and this is fitting treatment for a poem that has received an abundance of attention in relation to questions of intent and interpretation. Mandell calls it ‘arguably the most explicated poem that has been written in the English language’,\textsuperscript{36} and a decent case can be made in support of that argument; exhibit ‘A’ would be Brian G. Caraher’s monograph \textit{Wordsworth’s ‘Slumber’ and the Problematics of Reading}, a lengthy study of the critical legacy of this eight-line poem.\textsuperscript{37} Two classic accounts, by Cleanth Brooks and F. W. Bateson, illustrate the poem’s complexity by the fact that they appear to directly contradict one another. As John Baker Jr. succinctly puts it, ‘Bateson maintained that the speaker rises to a state of exultation in his contemplation of the now dead “Lucy’s” pantheistic communion with a state of nature, whereas Brooks conjectured that the speaker finds himself in a state of “agonized shock” as he contemplates “her utter and horrible inertness”’.\textsuperscript{38} E. D. Hirsch was responding to that contradiction when
he took up the case of ‘A slumber did my spirit seal’ to make claims about the nature of ‘objective interpretation’, versus what Eco would call over-interpretation. Hirsch ultimately came down on Bateson’s side, not because he was more convinced by the Wordsworth-as-pantheist view, but because he himself placed emphasis on intention and on ‘plausibility’: given what Wordsworth wrote elsewhere, Hirsch claimed, it’s more likely the case that he would also have written the kind of poem that Bateson described. Thus, probability is offered as a form of evidence in critical reading.

Not all critics have been so keen to show deference to authorial intention. J. Hills-Miller infamously characterised Wordsworth’s ‘touch of earthly years’ as ‘a form of sexual appropriation which leaves the one who is possessed still virgin if she dies young’, and he takes great liberties with the text throughout his reading; a claim about the name ‘Lucy’ – meaning light, or lucid – as part of the larger argument that the poem concerns the loss of logos, comes in spite of the fact that that name doesn’t appear in the poem at all. Knapp and Michaels, the originators of the fable of Colebrook’s I quoted above, that concerning an intentionless poem washed up by the sea, take aim at poststructuralist readings such as Miller’s, which they see as wanting to split apart the ‘in fact inseparable’ partners ‘authorial intention and the meaning of texts’ (p. 12). And it is to Knapp and Michaels’ essay that Virginia Jackson looks back when formulating the view, which has proved so influential in modern lyric studies, that through a ‘lyricization’ of poetry we have come to read a vast range of poem types through the single, and singularly modern, lens of ‘lyric’; for Jackson, implicit in the account of Knapp and Michaels is the assumption not just that those words on the beach are a text, but that they are a poem – and maybe even a poem we recognise as being by Wordsworth. Where we arrive, then, is at a poem that is caught in a critical double-bind: a case-study for intentionality because of its status as (short) lyric, yet treated as lyric precisely because it raises questions of intent.

How, then, can a case be made that the word ‘steal’ belongs to anyone other than those readers who incorrectly read it? Such a case would begin by evidencing an observation that I’ve already made – that there are a great deal of such mishearers, and that they include skilled and seasoned professional readers. It would also note that this is an uncommon phenomenon within literary critical discourse: it’s hard to think of a poem as well-known as this one that is also so frequently misread, and in such a way that could entirely alter comprehension of the poem. There is a case to be made that the problem belongs to the sounds of the poem itself (more on this to follow), but there is also the fact that
‘stealing’ makes a kind of obvious sense in relation to Wordsworth. This is not to suggest he is especially concerned with thievery in the most literal sense, although another *Lyrical Ballad*, ‘The Two Thieves’, puts into moralizing action its titular criminals. We are all familiar, too, with boat-stealing and egg-stealing episodes from *The Prelude*, and these come a little closer to where I want to end up with Wordsworthian stealing. ‘Stealing’ befits ‘A slumber did my spirit seal’ because that poem is concerned with a sense of loss experienced as if something really had been stolen – about a life actively revoked rather than passively lost. This is only a short step away from a major component of Christian thought: ‘the Lord Gave, and the Lord Hath Taken Away’.42 There is much good scholarship on Romanticism and gift giving, especially in the religious context, and Wordsworth is not exempt from such treatments.43 What I mean to identify in particular, though, is a logic of economics complementary to gift exchange, but which concerns losses that can register as apparent acts of theft – as takings away. Wordsworth is strongly attentive to such a logic and displays such thinking in proposed lines for a grave in his third essay ‘On Epitaphs’:

Take, holy earth! all that my soul holds dear:
Take that best gift which Heaven so lately gave.44

These lines foreground loss as an act of ‘taking from’, in response to the ‘gift of Heaven’, and move from the noun ‘gift’ to the verb ‘gave’ to remind us of a larger give–take economy. Note that whilst heaven gives, it is the earth (not much less ‘holy’ than heaven, perhaps) that takes away; this will be developed as something of a theme by Wordsworth and should remind us right away of Lucy’s ‘earthly’ fate. This could be theft, or it could be the natural order of things: life on earth is given, life is then taken away by the earth. What matters is that, by turns, this process appears to Wordsworth as both natural order and as theft. In the very same essay, he recalls stumbling upon a simple stone laid at a grave that bore ‘nothing more than the name of the Deceased with the date of birth and death, importing that it was an Infant which had been born one day and died the following’. He goes on: ‘more awful thoughts of rights conferred, of hopes awakened, of remembrances stealing away or vanishing were imparted to my mind by that Inscription there before my eyes than by any other that it has ever been my lot to meet with upon a Tomb-stone’.45 Make what you will of that ‘stealing away’ of remembrances, but in proximity to the child’s grave the phrase is a reminder of what is taken when another dies: of a loss, in part, of ourselves, as well as of another.
With remembrances that ‘steal away’ on their own we are approaching that second meaning of the verb ‘to steal’, one that is seen in the lines ‘Written in Early Youth’: to move by way of stealth. Such stealthiness is also central to the Wordsworthian experience of stealing that I’m closing in on, and here it may be time to consider an above-mentioned moment in *The Prelude*. The young Wordsworth takes a ‘Shepherd’s Boat’ out on a lake at night, before becoming frightened by the sight of a cliff that, ‘As if with voluntary power instinct’, appears to uprear its head. Despite the ubiquity of the ‘boat-stealing’ appellation in pedagogical and critical discourse, Wordsworth does not strictly judge himself a thief in his narrative. What he says is that the taking of the boat ‘was an act of stealth/And troubled pleasure’. ‘Stealth’ did mean, in Wordsworth’s day, an act of stealing, but it also had the related sense, for which we now employ the word, of moving secretly and without detection. Those meanings might be mutually exclusive, or this might be stealthy movement precisely because it is an act of theft. The passage continues:

> And, as I rose upon the stroke, my Boat
> Went heaving through the water, like a Swan;
> When from behind that craggy Steep, till then
> The bound of the horizon, a huge Cliff,
> As if with voluntary power instinct,
> Uprear’d its head: I struck, and struck again,
> And, growing still in stature, the huge Cliff
> Rose up between me and the stars, and still,
> With measur’d motion, like a living thing,
> Strode after me. With trembling hands I turn’d,
> And through the silent water stole my way
> Back to the Cavern of the Willow tree. (1. 404–15)

There’s much to admire here: the ‘growing’ stillness of the cliff, the action of something striding ‘like’ it were alive, the cliff as sole partition between the tiny body of the boy and an infinity of stars. And then there’s that last verb: *through the silent water stole my way back*. The boy’s hands are trembling because they are operating oars, but they may also be the trembling hands of a thief, as he at once moves quickly and silently back towards his home, and also ‘steals back’ his way – as if regaining time, or trying to take it back. (Back, we might note, to the shelter of a willow – trees that are already in a sense in tears before we transfigure them as near anagrams.) The image is one of a panicked
boy who, feeling a surge of regret for having taken a boat, then tries to revoke that action by 'stealing back' across the water. Subtly, then, this is a fictional return trip, where time's arrow momentarily seems to change direction: it is the poet of The Prelude poised, in search of lost time, over his own past, attempting to steal back his experiences from the still and silent waters of memory.

Wordsworth was, then, a poet concerned with stealing, but the most interesting thefts don't really concern things as materially manifest as boats. Instead, stealing usually describes the kind of event explored in the short lyric 'Lines Written at a Short Distance from my House', later titled 'To My Sister':

Love, now an universal birth,
From heart to heart is stealing,
From earth to man, from man to earth,
—It is the hour of feeling. (21–24)

A lot happens in this stanza – or, only one thing happens, but it apparently happens to everyone and to everything all at once. The poet in his most optimistic mood senses love 'stealing' between human agents, and, more promisingly still, between earth and man. That this is the 'hour' of feeling carries the same old threat of temporality: soon, we must imagine, that hour will pass. But for the time being there is a real promise of connection between man and nature, and that promise must be felt, and not otherwise empirically deduced, because it steals without detection. Stealing, then, is not the theft of material things like boats, nor (necessarily) the taking of life from a once living thing, but it is the insensible movement of an immaterial force. We can go further in fact, in adding that stealing is the insensible and transgressive movement of an immaterial force: a movement across borders, from man to man, or man to earth, or object to subject and vice versa. Suddenly we – us humans – don't seem so discontinuous at all, now that love has stolen across our limits, and suddenly we don't seem so disconnected from nature as once we might have. These are experiences that are central to what we think of, in the broadest terms, as Wordsworth's nature poetics, and they are readily couched within the terms of stealing.

Returning once more to The Prelude, this kind of experience is key to passages including that which begins 'There was a Boy,' which would also appear as a stand-alone poem in the 1800 Lyrical Ballads. The boy in question blows 'mimic hootings' to the owls across lake Windermere, but he finds in the silence between hoots, and not in the sounds themselves, the kinds of 'feeling' expressed in 'To My Sister':

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Listening, a gentle shock of mild surprize
Has carried far into his heart the voice
Of mountain torrents, or the visible scene
Would enter unawares into his mind
With all its solemn imagery, its rocks,
Its woods, and that uncertain Heaven, receiv’d
Into the bosom of the steady Lake. (5. 407–13)

Voices carried to the heart, images entered into the mind: these are acts of stealth, where an accidental state of wise passiveness permits us to hear and to see and to feel beyond the surface of nature, so that even a lake can offer a glimpse of heaven (however uncertain). That movement happens whilst the boy is ‘unaware.’ Wordsworth doesn’t call this ‘stealing,’ but it is what he elsewhere means by that term: a power in nature, its voice, creeps undetected across the boundaries of our own being, insensibly connecting us to the world at large. One of the greatest readers of this section of *The Prelude* is Paul de Man, whose ‘Time and History in Wordsworth’ remains seminal, and who elsewhere connects ‘A slumber’ to ‘There was a boy’ by way of allusion to ‘the shock of mild surprize’ in the former – marking precisely the stealing presence in the poem. All, then, would be well, except that ‘There was a boy’, unlike ‘To My Sister’ but very much like ‘A slumber did my spirit seal’, is elegiac within the context of *The Prelude*. In early drafts of the poem, that ‘surprize’ of the boy is matched by the reader’s surprise when suddenly pronouns shift and we realise that the boy is the past self of the narrator, who could just as easily be the poet. But moving the scene into the context of an autobiographical poem, Wordsworth saw fit to disown the memory, adding this supplementary paragraph to the narrative:

This Boy was taken from his Mates, and died
In childhood, ere he was full ten years old.
—Fair are the woods, and beauteous is the spot,
The Vale where he was born: the Church-yard hangs
Upon a Slope above the Village School,
And there, along that bank, when I have pass’d
At evening, I believe that oftentimes
A full half-hour together I have stood
Mute—looking at the Grave in which he lies. (5. 414–22)

He was *taken* from his mates. Again we are returned to that other sense of stealing – stealing away – and may well feel the wish, with the
narrator, to steal back time. The boy has been stolen, and the only recompense for this loss might feel like a paltry one: the chance to appreciate the natural beauty of the woods and vale where the boy was born and where he once felt life. Nothing in that beauty, though, seems adequate to make up for what has been taken, and the only sensible course of action is to stand still and unspeaking in the face of the grave.

Perhaps it’s the case that what is given to us in the first place is never given in its entirety, or to any sufficient degree; life, in the context of the ‘Winander Boy’, feels like little more than the promise of death. To speak in such terms is to speak of a scarcity of being, and Peter Larkin proposes just such a reading of ‘A slumber did my spirit seal’ in particular, and of the ‘Lucy’ poems in general. For Larkin, the poems concern the possibility of a fit between ‘the life of nature’ and ‘the life of man,’ as well as the scarcity that keeps man a part of nature, but only just so. This plays out in economic terms, as gift giving, where what is given is always in some sense insufficient. Larkin draws attention to the close of ‘Three Years She Grew’:

She died and left to me
This heath, this calm and quiet scene,
The memory of what has been
And never more will be.— (39–42)

As Larkin puts it, ‘time does not supervene on Lucy by insisting on a new arrival to replace her’, but rather ‘includes her in an unsevered bond of love moving on in time under the condition of scarcity’.47 A simpler observation of the above stanza might be that Wordsworth does figure death as a kind of gift, but not as an especially good or welcome one. The living inherit the landscapes in which the dead once moved about: landscapes that are now ‘quiet’ but perhaps once were not, and landscapes that come bound up in the ribbons of memory. Through that frailest of links, there is a connection of living human life to natural life, though it’s barely there – fragile, and dependent, in this case, upon the tragic loss of a child.

What we read of in ‘Three Years She Grew’, and what we can bring towards ‘A slumber did my spirit seal’, is a particular kind of Wordsworthian experience: the adult, who knows a thing or two about death (unlike the child in ‘We Are Seven’) gains a deeper experience of what it is to be connected to the natural world: to its cycles of life, to the heaths that are our inheritance, and, as in ‘A slumber did my spirit seal’, to the rocks and stones and trees with which we will all eventually roll. Thus what appears as stealing – the taking away of the life of a child – is
again more concerned with the sense of ‘stealing away’ or ‘stealing across’ or, as in the boat-stealing episode, ‘stealing back’ than it is with outright theft. There is a sense of return: from the mystery of our immaterial beings back into the ground from which we once arose. And these are experiences that are familiar to Romantic scholarship, even if they are not ordinarily thought of as acts of stealing.

This is not, of course, in itself a proof that Wordsworth had intentions for the word ‘steal’ to be found in ‘A slumber did my spirit seal’, and intentionality is always going to cause us problems in our quest for valid interpretations. Eco, in the lecture on ‘overinterpretation’ in which he takes Hartman to task, is careful to steer between the bad choice of what he calls intention operis and intention lectoris, and he credits Hartman with being interested in nothing so lowly as an author’s intent. What I’m proposing, though, is that, by taking up a method of hearing not dissimilar to Hartman’s, we’re moving towards an understanding of the poem that does in fact feel true to something like intention, and certainly seems valid as interpretation. Directly after the passage of his essay quoted by Eco when he makes the case for Hartman as an over-interpreter of Wordsworth, Hartman expands on his reading to suggest what it is, exactly, that haunts the individual words of ‘A slumber did my spirit seal’:

Pastoral elegy, in which rocks, woods, and streams are called upon to mourn the death of a person, or to echo the complaint of a lover, seems too extravagant a genre for this chastely fashioned inscription. Yet the muted presence of the form reminds us what it means to be a nature poet. From childhood on, as the autobiographical Prelude tells us, Wordsworth was aware of ‘unknown modes of being’ and of strange sympathies emanating from nature. He was haunted by an animistic universe that stimulated, shared, and called upon his imagination.48

Strange sympathies indeed: the consolation of ‘A slumber did my spirit seal’, if we can call it that, is that Lucy is now rolling around with rocks and stones and trees, deprived of feeling to become a nonhuman and unfeeling ‘thing’. Yet ‘sympathy’ does describe the stealing process in Wordsworth: the feeling that creeps across borders, such as those between life and death or human and non-human, and catches us by surprise as it does for the Winander boy. But that’s also to suggest that ‘stealing’ in the context of a poem like ‘To My Sister’ is a strange lexical choice given that it is weighed down, for Wordsworth, with the connotations of loss and of life taken. It’s a neat rhyme for ‘feeling’, but in that
poem, which is above all one concerning a sense of promise, there is a sense that the retraction of that promise comes bundled in the same gift wrap.

To hear the word ‘steal’ in place of the word ‘seal’ is in part to discover that all signs operate beyond intention. Words carry with them associations, which is why when Wordsworth uses a word like ‘stealing’ to describe the insensible creep of love from one heart to another he cannot hope, and does not wish, to cleanse it altogether of the sense of love revoked or stolen back. It’s no simple coincidence that the common mishearing of ‘seal’ and ‘steal’ occurs in the poem that Hartman took as his case study for a Freudian interpretation, wherein his supposition is that words themselves bespeak their own unconscious wishes. Elegy is always a kind of wishful thinking: it’s the desire to get back the thing lost, or the simple wish that that loss hadn’t taken place in the first instance. ‘A slumber did my spirit seal’ is a poem about a negotiation between the universes of life and of death, where the word ‘spirit’ asks us to consider death less as the body giving up the ghost, and more as of the earth, and our earthly years, stealing back the ghost from us. It is about life and death, then, and yet: ‘not only life and death but the nonequivalent interchange of words and things’. Mary Jacobus thus launches her investigation of ‘Romantic things’ by observing the thingification of Lucy, ‘untouched and untouchable,’ and the way that that process feeds into Wordsworth’s philosophy of language:

Wordsworth himself writes: “Words, a Poet’s words more particularly, ought to be weighed in the balance of feeling, and not measured by the space which they occupy upon paper.” Imbued with passion, they become weighty actors in their own right: “things, active and efficient, which are of themselves part of the passion.” Weighed in the balance of feeling, lyric poetry finds its own level.

Words, in this poem, are things: weighty with the freight of feeling and subject to the pull of gravity and the grave alike. Jacobus, like Hartman, recognises that this poem in particular allows its words to perform as actors, conning other parts beyond their own roles. It is little surprise, then, that it has invited the kinds of interpretation that Eco calls overinterpretation, and certainly no surprise that it appears to pull us into a region of hermeneutics divorced from the laws of intentionality. Defending over-interpretation more than he is defending Hartman, Culler notes that Wordsworth’s ‘diurnal’ – that word within which Hartman hears both ‘die’ and ‘urn’ – is ‘a latinate word which does indeed stand out in the context of the simple diction of Wordsworth’s
It takes centre stage, as it were, and that might well have been an intended effect on the part of the poet; yet that effect is to invite interpretation beyond the word’s meaning, and Hartman’s ‘die-urn-al’ seems all the more justified even as it sails away from anything we can safely say Wordsworth ‘meant.’ The words on the page have forces – ‘pulsions,’ in De Bolla’s phrasing – and they promote a truth-content that belongs fully to neither poet nor reader.

Given that a fact all critics can agree on is that this is a poem about life and death, it’s notable that ‘A slumber did my spirit seal’ never uses either of those words, or anything too much like them. Rather, its terms describe how someone used to appear untouched by earthly years – and it was merely an appearance or seemingness – followed by the present-tense image of that same person now that she is unmoving and non-perceiving. As Jacobus notes, the movement between stanzas in the poem, the switch from ‘then’ to ‘now’ that marks out the crucial moment for De Man in his reading of the poem, is in an important sense hardly a movement at all; we turn from someone who ‘cannot feel’ to someone who cannot hear or see. What Lucy ‘cannot feel’ is the touch of earthly years, but thanks to the power of that mid-sentence line break, Wordsworth also offers us a proleptic image of non-feeling in a totalizing sense. She couldn’t feel, but now she is ‘with’ – and thus, we often assume, ‘like’ – rocks, stones, and trees. In fact, this poem about loss is staged as a series of losses, and the deeper we read into the poem, the more we lose purchase on what might look like the consolatory gifts of death. Primed with the knowledge that Wordsworth is a Romantic poet, we might naively want to posit that the final lines of the poem sound a note of consolation in the images of nature: Lucy is now more deeply connected to natural forms. Subscribing to such a view, we’d be in good company: ‘Lucy is actually more alive now that she is dead’, writes F. W. Bateson. Even if this were the case, such a natural connection here depends upon a literal, not figurative, death and thus upon the subject at hand’s inability to appreciate any consolation whatsoever. It’s consolation for us, not for Lucy. As Robert Burns Neveldine writes in a footnote to an essay on ‘Nutting’, ‘it remains to be asked whether the cost to Lucy has been too great, especially since the speaker considers only herself’ (and note in this context, in turn, that Neveldine is amongst those who refer to the poem as ‘A slumber did my spirit steal’). But beyond that fact, the poem itself actually says nothing like what Bateson wants to claim when it comes to nature. That second stanza in truth reads like a list of bald assertions, ones that might not have any intrinsic connection to one another: now she has no motion; now she cannot hear or see; now the world continues turning. It’s true that, as the world
continues to turn without regard for the events of the poem, Lucy rolls ‘with’ those natural forms. But why assume that this togetherness is predicated upon her being dead, and thus read ‘with’ as ‘like’? We are all, surely, rolled with earth’s diurnal course anyway, living or dead. In that sense nothing appears to have changed here, beyond the dismissal of the ‘spirit’ of the opening line and those early abstractions, in favour of the fixed and tangible material forms of the latter lines. It is hard to see how that lack of real change could permit consolation.

The sole note of redemption in the poem instead might come in the form of a modicum of knowledge, as glimpsed in the first line and not in the last. Where once a slumber sealed the speaker’s spirit, now it is, one would assume, unsealed. Another way of thinking of this is as release, or as catharsis. The soul was once caught up in daydreams about immortality, and now it is not. But that knowledge, of ‘the way things are’ and of the awful materiality of being, is hardly an especially welcome gift. If we were enough assured in our thinking to speak in declaratives about this highly ambiguous first line, then we might well claim that ‘to have no human fears is the same thing as to have a sealed spirit. Both of these are defined by the speaker’s false assumption that Lucy will not grow old or die’. Redemption here is the eradication of falsehood, yet its cost is not only the realization of the fact of mortality, but the actual death of a girl. However, this poem isn’t trying to place a message in our hands, or to declare anything as ‘true’ for the reader’s benefit. Rather, we are back at a distinction put forward by Leighton, between thought and thinking: the poem is performing the complex thinking of a grieving mind, as it equivocates between the allure of compensation and the heavy feelings that revoke such recompense. The poem turns on the insensible stealing away of spirit, and it is about the sense of having something stolen away. And it is also, finally, about a young woman who was of this earth and then was reclaimed by it: existing, as conscious spirit, out of step with the rest of the material universe, only to be stolen back by the earth itself.

It is high time that something were said about sound in this poem and about sounding this poem as a critical method. I have been connecting a notion of ‘over-hearing’ to interpretation or ‘over-interpretation’ to ask questions about a methodology that currently has great purchase in the study of lyric forms, as a revitalization of Saintsburyean eye-and-ear reading. Whilst never losing sight of the relation of intention to interpretation, I want to suggest that, in the case of ‘A slumber did my spirit seal,’ the poem, if not the poet, does want us to stutter our way into ‘steal,’ as so many readers have done. That ‘pressure or pulsion’ De Bolla identifies in the ‘t’ of ‘spirit’ can be thought of
as a very real textual object, which is to say that it really exists in the poem and isn’t something we must by necessity bring to it as readers. While ‘steal’ isn’t in the poem, the text is yet forged in such a way that that idea is called to mind against or with our wills. The preceding sounds in the line set us up to expect a complication of hissing sibilance, in the chain of *slumber*, *spirit*, and *s[teal]*. That sequence, I would suggest, promotes dental and labial slurring, spitting, stuttering in place of simple sibilance. But a deeper sense of confusion is born of the basic units of rhythm in this poem and how we hear the shape of poetic feet. The line can, I think un-controversially, be scanned as follows:

[A *slumb*] [er *did]* [my *spir*] [it *seal*]

I’ve parcelled out the line according to the divisions of iambic feet, irrespective of semantic or syntactic sense; I’ve also italicised accented syllables. Distinguishing between accent and beat is in fact unnecessary here, as the two phenomena precisely coincide, which in part explains the strong lure of the poem’s tetrameter-trimeter line units; a balladic rhythm is strong to the point of tangibility, and there’s a good chance that nine readings out of ten of the poem will sound close to identical. My suggestion here is that, on the aural level, part of us is drawn towards a (nonsensical) ‘*spir* its seal’ rendering of the line’s ending, thanks to the heard division of feet – pulling what sounds like the possessive ‘its’ out of spirit, or else simply pluralizing that word to ‘spirits.’ At the least, our minds recognise the risk of that transegmental drift, arising from the fact that the phrasings ‘spirits seal,’ ‘spir, its seal,’ ‘spirit seal,’ and even ‘spirit’s eel’ are all homophonic. It is because we feel that risk of getting the line wrong that we over-compensate and call on the assistance of a breakwater ‘t’ – incorrectly, as it happens – to assist our reading. To lip ‘spirit steal’ feels like the right move, as if we are underscoring and enunciating the true shape of the words and pulling those ‘s’ sounds apart rather than lapsing softly into an indistinction of sibilance.

Something of that sort is behind the impulse by which scores of readers of Wordsworth have indeed produced ‘steal’ in place of ‘seal,’ thus affecting – at least initially – their account of the poem. Clearly, we are not in the realm of the ‘scientific’ or empirical models of linguistic rhythmical analysis that Perloff views as an impediment to the appreciation of poetry’s true sounds – there’s no final proof that can be produced to show that this is indeed what has led readers astray. But then, as Perloff further notes, from a certain view the lyric is *the* mode of subjectivity – of self-reflexiveness, the mode in which a solitary “I” is
overheard in meditation’. We’re back, then, at overhearing, and criticism of the lyric form is destined to retain some residual marks of all that syrupy subjectivity. Garrett Stewart, whose work I have been channeling, is attuned to the special ‘ambiguity’ of sibilance when he remarks that Pope’s phrase ‘thence your maxims bring’ can hit the ear as ‘thence your maxims spring’.

To stave off that reduplication of the ‘s,’ it seems we sometimes multiply spirit’s ‘t’; it is the perceived threat of a slip, without fully realizing what the slip might be, that sees us alight on the sturdier semantic unit of ‘steal’ over ‘seal,’ and as De Bolla points out, it is a simple and short journey for the ‘t’ to contaminate, or co-animate, the line’s ending. It is worth appreciating again that such misidentifications are not overly common in the appreciation of poetry, especially not in the titles of major lyrics by one of the foremost poets of the English canon. Yet this one persists. This line, then, which is deeply infused with sonic play through the chain of sibilance, the near-bookending of Ls (slumb/seal), the echoing Is (did, spirit), is out to bamboozle from the very first. If we read its last word as ‘steal,’ it is because the line impels us to do so.

You, reader, will now be in a position to judge whether such an act is valid as interpretation, or invalid as over-interpretation. There is always a third option, though: valid as over-interpretation. To alight on that third option, we will have to agree that there is some use in overhearing, and surrender to the notion that poems can want to be misheard. M. H. Abrams thinks something of the kind in his consideration of the critical treatment of ‘A slumber did my spirit steal,’ when he notes that J. Hillis Miller’s ‘allegorical’ and deconstructive reading is really just one kind of ‘over-reading’.

And that Miller’s reading is faulty in Abrams’ view has little to do with the fact of over-reading itself – indeed, Abrams defends a strong tradition of over-reading as a useful kind of interpretation. Instead, it’s the nature of Miller’s transgression: we once would ‘over-read a text in a way that would enlarge and complicate the signifi-
cance of the text-as-construed into a richer integrity’; Miller instead over-reads solely to ‘undermine’.

Either way, we’re sauntering away from intentionality; but, after New Criticism and the supposed demise of the author, that is always largely the case when we sit down to interpret. It is because of this that W. K. Wimsatt and Cleanth Brooks found it necessary to declare that the speaking voice in poetry is indeed a fictional ‘speaker’ and not the author’s own voice, and thus the dramatic monologue became a model for the interpretation of lyrics, and overhearing a model for reading.

Perhaps, though, it is interpretation itself that is the problem here. Rita Felski’s The Limits of Critique suggests that the only readerly assumption more pervasive and more wide-reaching than
the intentional fallacy is that which sees interpretation as the only end goal of professional reading. For Felski, interpretation or ‘critique’ is only one possible relationship to have with a text, and, when it is carried out under terms like ‘interrogating’ or, as with Miller, ‘undermining’ a text, it does not always feel like a healthy relationship. For Felski, we might instead start to re-think our critical reading practices by dropping our fondness for ‘de-’ prefixed verbs (demystify, destabilise, denaturalise) and focus instead on a ‘re-’ model of criticism: recontextualizing, reconfiguring, recharging perception. It’s striking just how much the critical readings of ‘A slumber did my spirit steal’ do cluster around those poles, of de- and re-criticism, and the poem is as instructive in terms of critical positions and their associated assumptions as it is in questions of interpretation or interpreting too much.

What this essay has been up to has been an effort to connect eye-and-ear readings of lyric poetry with Felski’s desire for a re-description of critical activity itself. If we are interested in interpretation – and, very often, we are – then we should critically consider our own positions in relation to texts. Felski argues that there might be richer possibilities than simple critique permits: ‘rather than looking behind the text – for its hidden causes, determining conditions, and noxious motives – we might place ourselves in front of the text, reflecting on what it unfurls, calls forth, makes possible.’ Strangely, none other than Geoffrey Hartman advocated a similar critical self-reflexivity in his writings on criticism, and his ‘The Interpreter: a Self-Analysis’ acts as a kind of companion piece to ‘The Interpreter’s Freud’ and its reading of Wordsworth. Amongst the ways in which Hartman encourages critical humility in front of works of literature is to remind the reader of ‘the secondary character of interpretation’: that, when understood as someone who generates no new material without first taking from another text, ‘the interpreter begins to appear as a thief, or a purveyor of stolen goods’. Critics might rightly be said to poach from literary works, but they also steal things into texts; the business of interpretation is one of importing as well as exporting. Either way, ‘hearing things’ in literary works implies its own kind of critical distance, positioning us as critics in front of objects without breaking out the tools of interrogation. We are like the Winander Boy, producing mimic hootings in our secondary position as critics and reporting on sounds as well as silences. Listen to the text, attend to it, and hear what it says on its own terms – the kind of meaning Adorno called ‘truth-content,’ in place of authorial intention or, indeed, radical hermeneutics on the part of the reader. Hearing and even over-hearing lyrics has the promise of getting at that middle ground in literature. For Felski, viewing the text as ‘coactor’ does not throw out authorial intention altogether,
but rather recalibrates such questions around the actualities of a text and the realities of reading practices. I’m here suggesting that one way in which we learn to appreciate, as well as interpret, the texts in front of us is by becoming good listeners.

To re-state, then: good listening will sometime mean hearing too much. As Fry argues, ‘what we call “simple misreading” can sharpen our understanding of literary texts,’ and straining our ears to catch a text’s drift will sometimes result in tearful trees, and slumbers that steal rather than seal. What I’m finally arguing isn’t that we look for puns or anagrams that may or may not be in the poem. We are, after all, on shaky terrain here when it comes to thinking in terms of textual objects – ‘steal’ is not literally present in Wordsworth’s poem. Its potential, however, demonstrably is, and Wordsworth’s earlier phrase ‘a slumber seems to steal’ is grounds enough for us to ask questions of the poem’s possible concern with stealing – a body of evidence in a growing critical casebook. In a sense, we’re back with E. D. Hirsch, and that ‘plausibility’ factor that should keep us always within the neighbourhood of intentionality, if not directly at its door; after all, there are other ways of mishearing this poem that are both less common and less plausible (‘as lumber did my spirit seal,’ where spirit has already become like a tree in the first line). Thus what I propose is also what Felski puts forward in The Limits of Critique: that in hearing poems we should also hear ourselves read. We should be aware of our shortcomings as readers, yes, but we should also listen to the demands a text makes of us and the ways in which we respond to those demands. If we find, time and again, that there is a readerly habit of mispronouncing or misidentifying the same crucial word in a poem, it might be that we are learning about what it is to read poetry.

At any rate, what this essay has done is produce a reading of a lyric within a common tradition: we weigh up bodies up evidence – not proofs, not irritably reached-after facts – and we ask ourselves what the reading at hand gives us, in terms of broadening our understanding of a poem or poet. The evidence is there in the students and scholars who write or speak ‘steal’. It’s compounded by Wordsworth’s insistent pressure on immaterial stealings – the transgressive movement from the world of the living to the world of the dead, where those are also the worlds of living human beings and the universe of dead things – and by the elegiac tone that frequently accompanies that experience in his poetry, including ‘A slumber.’ In terms of where this reading gets us: it draws to the surface of one of Wordsworth’s best-known lyrics an experience he writes about extensively elsewhere, but does not elaborate in that lyric itself. It brings to Lucy’s death the notion that life is
a gift, one given only to be taken away. It offers a structural parallel to that notion, where the first stanza treats the theme of life-as-gift, and the second stanza reflects on loss as a life taken. The fact that those stanzas overflow their own borders, so that life is marked by non-feeling, and death by the same activity we’re all party to anyway (existing, day and night, on an indifferently turning planet), is reflective of the fact that things insensibly transgress their rightful place. Unawares to us at first, as readers of the world of Wordsworth’s poem, death and life steal across the page, in the back-and-forth struggle the narrator is involved in between a consolatory narrative and an utter sense of loss. It’s in this vein that Bateson’s pantheistic-redemptive reading is right, but only momentarily; the poem gives us that clear sense, only then to steal it away. And reading crosses over into over-reading just as insensibly. Hartman was clear that in reading we are also doing something: ‘read “tears” and the animating, cosmic metaphor comes alive’. If we read the poem wrong, then we bring it to life, and in so doing breathe life, momentarily, back into the dead girl. We’re complicit with the text in an act of reanimation. What this way of reading also gives us, then, is a lesson in what it means to listen to a lyric. Rhetoric is heard, and poetry is overheard, but poetry is also frequently misheard. That, it seems, is part of the experience of poetry, and poetry’s dense complexity. In over-hearing beyond the words on the page, we may very well be attuned to precisely what the poem wants us to hear.

Notes

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8 The spelling was changed to ‘seal’ after I began my enquiries for this article: I’m grateful to Jeff Cowton, curator at the Wordsworth Trust, for his generous assistance, and for being a good sport.
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10 René Wellek, ‘Destroying Literary Studies,’ Theory’s Empire: An Anthology of Dissent (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2005), p. 46. Wellek’s essay originally appeared in 1983, in The New Criterion; the spelling remains the same across both versions.
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