CHAPTER 4

How Awesome Is This Place!

Wordsworth’s *Poems on the Naming of Places*

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[Some minds] find tales and endless allegories
By river margins, and green woods among.

—P. W. 2:486

Wordsworth’s intense and quite idiosyncratic interest in the relationship of language to land, while evident throughout his works, is focused in the *Poems on the Naming of Places,* written in his first year of residence at Grasmere. The epigraph to this chapter is found in MS. M as *Motto for Poems on the Naming of Places* (P. W. 2:486). It appears to issue a caution against reading these poems as personal history and invites close attention to their poetic devices. The phrase “endless allegories” is particularly suggestive, for, as in Robert Lowth’s *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews,* the term allegory at this time suggested a master trope of resemblance—often a created rather than an intrinsic resemblance, and especially evocative of biblical models, encompassing metaphor, continued metaphor, parable, and mystical allegory. Yet Wordsworth, in the “Advertisement” to these poems, purports to claim the status of personal history for them, and even to trivialize their subject matter—“little incidents.” This apparent discrepancy in authorial claims provides only one dimension of the poems’ difficulties. Are the poems found tales and endless allegories, or are they exercises in recording the “private and

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peculiar interest” attendant on certain unnamed sites near Grasmere? Here is Wordsworth’s “Advertisement”:

By persons resident in the country, and attached to rural objects, many places will be found unnamed or of unknown names, where little Incidents must have occurred, or feelings been experienced, which will have given to such places a private and peculiar interest. From a wish to give some sort of record to such Incidents, and renew the gratification of such feelings, Names have been given to Places by the Author and some of his Friends, and the following Poems written in consequence. (P. W. 2:111)

One reason the poems have not received much critical attention may be traced to this curious understatement (or misstatement) of the poems’ nature and the author’s purpose. That the motto and advertisement offer very different perspectives on the poems is appropriate, for I believe that this discrepancy is only one of many indications that the Poems on the Naming of Places are not exactly what they seem, and why they tend to produce conflicting responses. “It was an April morning,” a poem to which I shall return later, illustrates the conflict. At first reading, the poet/speaker appears ingenuous, artless, “natural.” His language is simple; his images are concrete, apparently descriptive of no more than the natural scene in which the poem is set; and the poem’s meaning is, so it seems, transparent: The poet discovers a pleasant, “wild nook,” dedicates it to his sister, and names it “Emma’s Dell.” In a brief discussion of these poems, Stephen Gill, in his fine biography of Wordsworth, remarks, in line with the claims of the advertisement, that “Most of [the Poems on the Naming of Places] relate some new pleasure found locally . . .” (181). Further consideration, however, undermines one’s sense of an artless narrator who tells a simple tale. Indeed he begins to sound not ingenuous, but ingenious, or, more intriguingly, actually disingenuous.

A certain disingenuousness may be seen even in the language of the advertisement. Its difficulties are several, but chief among them is the ambiguity of the phrase, “some sort of record.” If Wordsworth had said, “From a wish to record such Incidents,” the names and the poems would more clearly have an objective, historical relationship to the incidents of “private and peculiar interest.” The actual wording, however, makes it reasonable to assume that “some sort of record” might be quite different from a history: it might be a fiction, for example, a found tale, or an allegory, or a figurative rendering (such as a mythological etymology) whose relationship to the incident, real or imagined, need be neither objective nor historical. I want to accept the challenge of the motto and argue that the Poems on the Naming of Places are imaginative, complex works (“tales and