TOPOGRAPHY AS EPITAPH OR EPITAPH AS TOPOGRAPHY: WORDSWORTH’S EXCURSION

Saeko Yoshikawa

Landscape in Wordsworth’s poetry is often endowed with the story of a person who lives or has once lived there. It is sometimes coloured by the poet’s own memory and sometimes by local traditions or legends. Natural objects in landscape often serve as epitaphs which induce the poet to tell about those related to each spot. For instance, in “Michael”, our notice is first turned to “a straggling heap of unhewn stones” (17), to which “a story appertains” (18). This unfinished sheepfold survives Michael, the old heartbroken shepherd, and preserves his memory, like an epitaph. In “The Thorn”, topographical description of the aged thorn, the muddy pond, and the beauteous hill of moss, introduces us to the tragic story of Martha Ray. And in “The Ruined Cottage” the mouldering house with the untended garden, tells about the suffering of Margaret, its last tenant, who now sleeps in the calm earth. As Geoffrey Hartman suggests in his essay, “Wordsworth, Inscriptions, and Romantic Nature Poetry”, it seems that Wordsworth tends to “[read] landscape as if it were a monument or grave”.

Hartman further points out that “this fundamental attitude of reading the (epitaphic) characters of nature joins ‘The Ruined Cottage’ to Bks.5ff. of The Excursion”, though he stops there and does not develop the idea of the epitaphic or death-obsessed character of this poem. Certainly The Excursion is a poem in which this attitude is most conspicuous, but it

* This is a revised and enlarged version of the paper presented at the Wordsworth Summer Conference in Grasmere, 12 August 1997.
3 Ibid.
might be better to say in this poem there is an attitude of regarding the
land, rather than landscape, as being "Fraught with the relics of mortality"
(253, VI: 82) and their memories. In The Excursion there can be seen
something of an obsession with land, earth, or with the undulations of
the ground, which introduces us to the topography of Grasmere. This
obsession with the land also turns our attention towards the epitaphic
stories of those lying under the ground. The land or the earth itself, not
some conspicuous objects on it, serves for epitaph. Or, to put it in
another way, human memories are absorbed into the heaving earth.

In this essay, I would like to show how in The Excursion, the telling of
the epitaphic stories of the inhabitants (living or dead) goes along with
the delineation of the local topography. Of course there have been some
critics, such as Frances Ferguson, who have paid attention to the epi-
taphic mode in The Excursion, and there have been also some critics, such
as Jonathan Bate, who have considered how important the natural envi-
ronment of the Lakeland was to Wordsworth’s poetry. What I would like
to do here, however, is to explore the close relationship between epi-
taphic mode and topographical description in The Excursion, or how in
this poem tracing the undulations of the land is connected to tracing the
memories of the departed parishioners. And I would like to go on to
consider how this combination of the sense of past lives and the sense of
land influences Wordsworth’s view of death and immortality, oblivion
and funeral monument, natural surroundings and human memory.

The Excursion, in the framework of its narrative, describes a walking
tour undertaken by the Poet, the Wanderer, and later with the Solitary,

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4 All quotations from The Excursion are referred to the original text as reproduced in
blankets, the page numbers of this book are given first; the numbers on the right indicate
the corresponding lines in The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth (Vol. V), ed. by Ernest

5 Frances Ferguson, Wordsworth: Language as Counter-Spirit. (New Haven: Yale University
Press, 1977); Jonathan Bate, Romantic Ecology: The Environmental Tradition. (London:
Routledge, 1991). Ferguson associates Wordsworth’s epitaphic mode of thought with his
sense of transitoriness of words and memory, (which I have argued in the latter part of
this essay,) but she does not connect the poet’s epitaphic mode with his sense of place.
Bate finds in the “Poems on the Naming of Places”, Wordsworth’s tendency to trace the
past in the geography of Grasmere, but he does not explore this tendency in The Excursion.
through the vales of Cumberland. Here and there we are given pictures of vigorous walkers who toil up and down the mountainous country, and we can trace to some extent the topography of this region through the poem. The Excursion can be read as a topographical poem, which describes the contours of the land traced by the pedestrian travellers.\(^6\)

The travellers in the poem seem, however, to be more often described taking a rest than walking. When they find some recess or a shade, they stop and take repose. Though they love to walk, they love to pause as much. In the opening of the poem, the poet toiling across a hot summer field enviously imagines a picture of a man “who on the soft cool moss / Extends his careless limbs along the front / Of some huge cave” (3–4, I: 9–11). And “with good hope that soon [he] should obtain / As grateful resting-place” (4, I: 18–19), the poet is toiling through the slippery turf. When he finally reaches the wished-for place, now he finds the Wanderer “upon the Cottage bench, / Recumbent in the shade” (5, I: 35–36). In less than forty lines we are shown three images of rest. Actually, the topography of this region is delineated not only through walking but also through recumbent figures. A big tree, a shady nook, moss-clad stones, or soft heath heaving gently — such topographical features invite the weary travellers to quit the rough roads and repose a while. In this poem there can be seen many topographical descriptions of such recesses, which are “perfect spot[s]” “For rest of body” (“Home at Grasmere”, 22)\(^7\), and reposing seems to be an important motif of this poem.

While resting, the travellers indulge in meditative conversation, the subject of which is almost exclusively the departed parishioners. The coolness of the shade leads their minds into thoughts of death. It is from the Wanderer reclining in the shade of elms, that the Poet hears the story of Margaret, a departed inhabitant of the ruined cottage; and in the shady nook of the churchyard, the pastor tells them epitaphic stories of his parishioners. The travellers, reposing in the cool shelter, listen to stories of those who are reposing under the ground. The Excursion could indeed be read also as a collection of such epitaphs.

In his first “Essay upon Epitaphs”, Wordsworth describes a traveller who takes a rest, leaning upon a tombstone, whether halting “from wea-


\(^7\) The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth (Vol. 5), 320.
riness or in compliance with the invitation, 'Pause, Traveller!'". The trav-
ellers in The Excursion, too, sometimes halt as if they felt such an epitaphic
invitation, as can be seen in the following example.

The poet and his friend, the Wanderer are toiling across savage region,
weary from the heat and the difficult walk, when suddenly there appears
"Beneath [their] feet, a little lowly Vale" (67, II: 328). It is surrounded by
tall mountains and includes a little pool in its breast. The poet thinks
"Urn-like it [is] in shape, deep as an Urn" (67, II: 333); and its sense of
seclusion and sense of repose invite the two travellers to repose a while:

 Ah! what a sweet Recess, thought I, is here!
 Instantly throwing down my limbs at ease
 Upon a bed of heath;... (68, II: 349-51)

They thus lie down at the edge of a vale whose shape may suggest a
 cinerary urn. They are lying peacefully and quietly, as if in a grave, when
they hear a mournful sound ascending from the bottom of the urn-like
vale, as if coming up from underground. It is a funeral dirge, sung by a
band of rustic people for a deceased member of their community.

According to the Solitary, one of the tenants of this lonely vale, this
old pensioner, who lived dependent on public charity, met with a storm
in the mountain and stayed a night sheltered in a ruined chapel. Next
morning a search party came up, and "Chancing to pass this wreck of
stones", they found him "Couched in a nook" (89, II: 813-5):

 Lying full three parts buried among tufts
 Of heath-plant, under and above him strewn,
 To baffle, as he might, the watery storm:
 And there we found him breathing peaceably,
 Snug as a Child that hides itself in sport
 Mid a green hay-cock in a sunny field. (89, II: 818-23)

He is found breathing peacefully, but the sleeping figure buried in grasses
seems to prevision his eternal sleep. He is lifted gently from the ground
and carried down the mountain, and three weeks later, he is now being
carried from the vale to be laid under the ground in eternal peace. In this
poem reclining on the earth has a subtle association with death. The

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image of a man lying on the ground is connected with that of the dead lying under the ground.

The approximation of these two kinds of rest is shown more clearly in the next example, where the death of an old clergyman is described. After depriving him of all his family, death, an “unexpected sleep” (323, VII: 282), falls on the old man “in one blest moment” (323, VII: 283):

... Like a shadow thrown
Softly and lightly from a passing cloud,
Death fell upon him, while reclined he lay
For noon-tide solace on the summer grass,
The warm lap of his Mother Earth: ... (323, VII: 283–7)

A man sleeping on the earth, after a cloud passes, is turned to a body lying beneath the earth. The change is so subtle and gentle, that he almost seems to be still reposing under the shade of a tree. The only difference is whether he is above or beneath the ground. Sleep has often been regarded as a state similar to death, but here it is not sleeping but laying one’s body on the ground that brings a living person near to the condition of death. This association may come from the poet’s own experience, as recorded in Dorothy’s Grasmere Journals:

We then went to Jones Grove, sate a while at first. Afterwards William lay, & I lay in the trench under the fence — he with his eyes shut & listening to the waterfalls & the Birds... he [William] thought that it would be as sweet thus to lie so in the grave, to hear the peaceful sounds of the earth & just to know that ones dear friends were near. (29 April, 1802)

Here the poet, lying on the earth, fancies himself lying in a grave. The association of lying down in natural surroundings and death so clearly shown here may remind us of Wordsworth’s attitude in “A Poet’s Epitaph”, where he addresses a passenger who comes by the grave of a poet: “Here stretch thy body at full length; / Or build thy house upon this grave” (59–60). He recommends being spatially near the dead, before spiritually approaching them. This sense of physical continuity with the dead seems to characterize Wordsworth’s view of life and death, and it leads him to the idea of “a community of the living and the dead”, which

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appears in his first “Essay upon Epitaphs”\(^\text{10}\) and is explored in *The Excursion*, especially in books five to seven.

In Book five, when the pedestrian travellers ask the Pastor to tell about the tenants of the churchyard, he begins with a story of a living couple. They treat both the living and the dead equally, just as the little girl in “We are Seven”, who lives in a church-yard cottage, near her departed sister and brother, naturally counts them among her seven siblings. The pastor tells stories of the living as if reading epitaphs, and talks about the dead as if gossiping. He seems to make no difference between them. And the church-yard, “a visible center of a community of the living and the dead”, appears not so much a gloomy graveyard as a green pasture:

Green is the Church-yard, beautiful and green;  
Ridge rising gently by the side of ridge;  
A heaving surface — almost wholly free  
From interruption of sepulchral stones,  
And mantled o’er with aboriginal turf  
And everlasting flowers. These Dalesmen trust  
The lingering gleam of their departed Lives  
To oral records, and the silent heart;  
Depository faithful, and more kind  
Than fondest Epitaphs: for, if it fail,  
What boots the sculptured Tomb? ... (277, VI: 605-15)

Though there can be seen scarcely any tombstones, those ridges rising gently suggest there used to be heaps of earth raised for graves; that is, their departed fellows are lying under them. The flowers covering the field may have been planted by some villagers in memory of their dearest ones. Their affections for their deceased are not inscribed on tombstones but are expressed in flowers sprinkled over the pasture, composing a landscape of the village.

In *The Excursion*, epitaphs as letters inscribed on monumental stones are not regarded so important. The memories of the departed are entrusted to the oral record or to the heart of each parishioner, though these depositories do not seem to assure them eternal preservation. And these memories are embedded in the topography of the region — swelling earth decorated only with native plants.

\(^{10}\) *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth* (Vol. 2), 56.
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Special monuments are not needed, just as in the churchyard among the mountains described in “The Brothers”, where there is neither epitaph nor tombstone. There are only a few mounds or ridges on the turf people tread every day. They do not particularly try to enclose a place for the dead: “The dead man’s home / Is but a fellow to that pasture field” (169–170). It seems that for people to die is only to move a little the place of habitation. Some people are working in the green pasture and others are resting in the green churchyard. The living and the dead are neighbours in the same parish, composing one community.

In The Excursion, too, the grassy hillocks in the churchyard are continuous with those of the neighbouring pastures, which roll gently towards the mountains. The borderline separating the graveyard from the outer ground is blurred, and this may also suggest that the distinction between the living and the dead is obscured. When the Pastor remarks, “To a mysteriously-consorted Pair / This place is consecrate; to Death and Life” (242, V: 903–4), “this place” does not only refer to the churchyard; it could also refer to the whole parish. The green ridges of the graveyard stretch over to the outer ground on which the survivors are walking, as is shown in the opening of Book Seven:

“These grassy heaps lie amicably close,”
Said I, “like surges heaving in the wind
Upon the surface of a mountain pool:
— Whence comes it, then, that yonder we behold
Five graves, and only five, that lie apart,
Unsociable company and sad;
And, furthermore, appearing to encroach
On the smooth play-ground of the Village-school?”

(310–11, VII: 31–37)

The heaps of grave are merged in imagination into the surrounding landscape, when they are likened to the ripples on the surface of the water. The “heaving” surface of the graveyard is imagined as a miniature of the topography of the lake country. And the five mounds of a family grave literally trespass onto the outer ground.

Thus the enclosure of the churchyard is broken, and it is incorporated into the land outside. The hillocks or ridges raised for graves in old days have “Sunk almost to a level with the plain / By weight of time” (305, VI: 1197–98), and have been absorbed into the rolling plain. The whole
ground of the parish is allowed to become, as it were, an enlarged graveyard.\(^{11}\) When we imagine that the swelling earth on which we stand may be reminiscent of graves, or “Fraught with the relics of mortality” (258, VI: 82), as the Poet does in the opening of Book six, the topography of this region itself will appear to be a large-scale epitaph for those lying beneath.

The undulations of the ground in this poem appear to be fraught with human stories as well as their relics. The transferred epithets in “heaving surface”, “swelling hills” or “swelling turf” may suggest something breathing or some animated motion. It seems as if the heaving ground were inspired with life, and about to utter a word. Thus when the Pastor is asked to “pronounce . . ./ Authentic epitaphs” (230, V: 65–51) on those resting in the graveyard, he does not just read the letters engraved on the tombstones, but he casts his eyes on the ground, as if expecting the hillocks to begin to tell stories of those reposing beneath them. For instance, a pair of mounds, big and small, attracts his eye; he thinks that “the small heap / Speaks for itself; — an Infant there doth rest” and “The sheltering Hillock” suggests it is “the Mother’s grave” (286, VI: 790–92). They remind the Pastor of a seduced and deserted girl, Ellen, and her short-lived baby. Thus tracing topography is closely related to narrating epitaphs.

Actually the Pastor is constantly sensible to the undulations of the earth. And pointing to hillock after hillock, he derives narrative epitaphs from them. The earth is the resting place for his departed parishioners, and to cast his eyes upon it induces him to think of them, to trace their memories. If epitaphs are what preserve memories of the deceased, it is not so much the inscribed letters on tombstones but the topography or contours of the earth that function as epitaphs for the Pastor.

In The Excursion, we find many terms such as “ridges”, “heaps”, “hillocks”, “mounds”, or “heaving ground”. These topographical terms all

\(^{11}\) Here Wordsworth might be compared with the graveyard poets, especially with Gray, in whose Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard, the whole village is seen as an enlarged graveyard. This viewpoint, however, seems to derive from the tradition of poetry of retirement, such as Herrick’s, in which a grave is seen as a secluded place for meditation, distanced from the world. It seems that for Gray, rustic people approximate to the dead because both are obscure, forgotten being. Elegy does not seem to share the idea of “community of the living and the dead”, which is expressed in The Excursion.
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refer to the condition of the churchyard, but they can be also applied to descriptions of the contours of the land in general. The Pastor's eyes go beyond the churchyard, from a ridge as grave to the mountain ridge:

"Here rests a Mother. But from her I turn
And from her Grave. — Behold — upon that Ridge,
Which, stretching boldly from the mountain side,
Carries into the centre of the Vale
Its rocks and woods — the Cottage where she dwelt;
And where yet dwells her faithful Partner, left
(Full eight years past) the solitary prop
Of many helpless Children... (301, VI: 1115-22)

The word "ridge" means a mountain ridge here, but in many other parts of the poem, it refers to graves. With the eye which looked upon the "Ridge rising gently by the side of ridge" in the churchyard, the mountain ridge may appear to be a repetition of the heap of earth which embraces the body of the mother. In a way, the mountain ridge, where her memories are cherished by her family, could be said to have the function of a natural epitaph, that is, to function as a reminder of the departed.

In constructing an epitome of the life of the dalesmen, at the same time the Pastor introduces us to the topography of the dale. He leads our attention from the graveyard to topographical features of the whole vale, and on to a cottage, which seems to have "sprung self-raised from earth" (302, VI: 1144), then to trees or a grove, cultivated fields, a path or a road beaten on the earth. And by telling stories of those who have led lives among these things, he turns such topographical features, in effect, into epitaphs. We may trace the process in the following passage:

Almost at the root
Of that tall Pine, the shadow of whose bare
And slender stem, while here I sit at eve,
Oft stretches tow'rds me, like a long straight path
Traced faintly in the green sward; there, beneath
A plain blue Stone, a gentle Dalesman lies...

(328, VII: 395-400)

Here again we have a picture of a man lying in the shade, though he is beneath the earth. It is a plain and almost unremarkable scene, in which a tall tree casts its shadow upon the turf. But it may be important that the
shadow also stretches on the ground, for the verb “stretch”, which would convey some sense of motion, allows the shadow to seem alive, to be like a path connecting the living and the dead, which leads the Pastor to the memories of the one resting there. This is for him an epitaphic landscape; and for us too, through the story of the deaf dalesman told by the Pastor, the shadow of the tree comes to take on “its own peculiar sanctity”:

— And yon tall Pine-tree, whose composing sound
  Was wasted on the good Man’s living ear,
  Hath now its own peculiar sanctity;
  And, at the touch of every wandering breeze,
  Murmurs, not idly, o’er his peaceful grave.

(311, VII: 477–81)

The pine-tree with its shadow, under which the man lies, serves as an epitaph guarding his grave and preserving his memories. The lullaby composed by the branches swaying above, like a natural Aeolian harp, is transmitted to the movement of the shadow extending below, and touches the earth which mantles the sleeping dalesman. The sound which was once wasted on his ear, now reaches him through the sense of touch. And the music of the tree is performed for the travellers resting on the ground, as a “soft eye-music of the waving” shadow (“Airey-Force Valley”, 14).12 This shadow picture of a silent music, with the help of synaesthesia, may lead to thoughts of the departed deaf dalesman. Thus a natural object can become an epitaph through the memories retained among the living inhabitants.

This memorable passage on the deaf dalesman is quoted by Wordsworth to conclude his tripartite “Essays upon Epitaphs”, in the beginning of which he refers to natural epitaphs such as trees, stones or heaps of earth. He remarks:

Almost all Nations have wished that certain external signs should point out the places where their dead are interred. Among savage tribes unacquainted with letters this has mostly been done either by rude stones placed near the graves, or by mounds of earth raised over them. This custom proceeded obviously from a twofold desire; first, to guard the remains of the deceased from irreverent approach or from savage violation: and, secondly, to preserve

their memory.13

Most of the epitaphs gathered in The Excursion are, as it were, such primitive kinds as have been used from preliterate times, rather than sculptured tombstones. They do not interrupt the natural contours of the country, but they merge into or compose the topography.

Hartman, in the essay mentioned above picks up some examples of natural inscriptions such as a pond, a hill of moss, a stunted tree, and a heap of stone, all of which have "letter-like distinctness".14 In The Excursion, too, there can be seen a few such inscription-like trees, stones, or a cottage. But in most cases, there is not even such a natural monument, only ridges of earth or heaps of ground faintly suggesting the existence of departed lives lying under the feet. Here, epitaphs appear in the shape of the land rather than as inscriptions or as letter-like objects.

Such forms of epitaph may seem in a way very frail and unreliable as depository of memories. Human memories are likely to sink into oblivious, indifferent plots of land, as is suggested in the following passage. This is the conclusion of the story of a miner who persevered in his search for precious ore:

— He vanish'd; but conspicuous to this day
The Path remains that linked his Cottage-door
To the Mine's mouth; a long, and slanting track,
Upon the rugged mountain's stony side,
Worn by his daily visits to and from
The darksome centre of a constant hope.
This Vestige, neither force of beating rain,
Nor the vicissitudes of frost and thaw
Shall cause to fade, till ages pass away;
And it is named, in memory of the event,
The PATH OF PERSEVERANCE. (261, VI: 244-52)

The Miner's everyday walk has worn a path on the earth. This reminder of his life, on the one hand, delineates a part of the topography of the mountain country, and on the other hand, it appears to be epitaphic, in that it survives him to preserve some evidences of his life. And after his death this path is really turned into an epitaph by the parishioners who

14 Hartman, 223.
walk along the path and give it a name to commemorate his life. His memories are thus retained in the local topography.

But the topography will not keep his memories permanently. What is noticeable here is the phrase “till ages pass away”. The Pastor says that the path or the vestige of the miner’s life will linger for ages, but he does not expect that it will remain forever. The path engraved on the earth will someday fade away and so will its name and his memory. The trace of his activity will be eventually submerged into the nameless topography. The Pastor, however, does not seem to regret this. He does not believe in immortality of memory. He is apparently content with a limited immortality on earth, as is shown in the following passage, which concludes the story of a good Priest:

...An unelaborated Stone
May cover him; and by its help, perchance,
A century shall hear his name pronounced,
With images attendant on the sound;
Then, shall the slowly-gathering twilight close
In utter night; and of his course remain
No cognizable vestiges, no more
Than of this breath, which forms itself in words
To speak of him, and instantly dissolves.

(326, VII: 352–60)

The Pastor estimates that it is for only one hundred years that a community will remember its departed members. He believes that the tombstones will retain the memories of those sleeping beneath for a certain period. But it does not ensure eternal preservation of the vestiges of their lives. In a century, the monumental stones will be weathered away, and accordingly their memories will dwindle away. The oral records are transient, but the written records or monumental stones are no more endurable.

This attitude toward death, immortality and funeral monument seems rather different from that expressed in “Essays upon Epitaphs”. There Wordsworth asserts that epitaphs or funeral monuments proceed from our innate sense of immortality, from “an intimation or assurance within us, that some part of our nature is imperishable”. It is “the consciousness of a principle of immortality”, he says, that awakens in a man “the desire to live in the remembrance of his fellows”.15

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In *The Excursion*, however, those who rest in the earth appear not to have been covetous of remembrance. They do not seem to want their names to be preserved in endurable monuments, and they let their graves sink into the breast of earth. The Wanderer, who has told the tale of Margaret, anticipates that she will be forgotten in her quiet grave, just as the abandoned cottage is gradually decaying into dust. Every trace of human activity will die and fall, and "Nature’s pleasant robe of green, / Humanity’s appointed shroud, enwraps / Their monuments and their memory" (355, VII: 997–99).

Why do they not care about being forgotten after death? Do they not have the sense of immortality, which Wordsworth regards as implanted in all human beings? Perhaps they do have a consciousness of immortality, but they do not particularly want their individual names to gain permanent remembrance. In *The Excursion*, the dead are treated less as individuals than collectively. It is not that the dead are considered in abstract or general terms; they are respectively given their own names, own stories, and own graves. Yet their graves are almost mingled together and submerged into the ground. So are their epitaphic stories. These are somehow more interesting as a cluster of narratives than being read separately. Each individual name and his memory may be forgotten but they are incorporated into one communal memory and cherished by the parishioners as part of their history.

All this indicates significant differences between the early and later Wordsworth in his attitude toward the relationships between nature and human mind, communal history and personal memories. In his early poems, for example in "Poems on the Naming of Places", or in "Hart-Leap Well", Wordsworth tries to humanize natural objects by giving them names or human stories; or as can be seen in *The Prelude* and the "Lucy Poems", he tries to internalize or appropriate the external landscape by attaching his private memories or personal feelings to it. On the other hand, in *The Excursion*, the poet regards the natural landscape in itself, without trying to internalize it. Observing the undulations of the ground, in general terms, as being fraught with "relics of mortality", he now sees the landscape as coloured not so much by his own private feelings as by communal memories shared among people in a community. And furthermore, he now seems to accept "the calm oblivious tendencies / Of Nature" (47, I: 928–29). Instead of trying to immortalize the "spots of time" scenes with his poetic language, he accepts that all human achievements,
their names or memories will eventually fall into oblivion, as their graves gradually sink into the earth. Epitaphs or human narratives, with which the poet once tried to humanize natural landscape, are now absorbed into the topography.

Thus the topography delineated in this poem not only shows the geographical map which the pedestrian travellers follow, but also implies a certain history of the community. Topography takes on a temporal dimension as well as a spatial one. The undulating ground, which dimly suggests the vestige of graves, reminds the Pastor of his departed parishioners lying there, and leads him to tell their histories before they sink into oblivion. If a story of someone is forgotten, another story will be drawn from another ridge. Even if individual memories are forgotten, communal memory will be preserved in the topography of the region. *The Excursion*, thus, could be read as a record of the poet’s walk through this epitaphic topography, or a record of his tracing epitaphs or communal history embedded in the topography of his native country.