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Veiled Movements in *The Vale of Esthwaite*

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The *Vale of Esthwaite* (1787), Wordsworth's first sustained effort at original composition, was first published in 1940 by Ernest De Selincourt in *Poetical Works of Wordsworth* as an example of the juvenilia. Among scholars who have treated the De Selincourt version of the poem, Geoffrey Hartman's account in *Wordsworth's Poetry, 1787-1814* is the fullest, which argues that *The Vale of Esthwaite* turns upon the mind of a poet enthralled by nature despite signs that his imagination may well be independent of nature (76-89). Other treatments of De Selincourt's edition appeared in F. W. Bateson, Paul Sheats, Thomas Weiskel, James Averill, Jonathan Wordsworth, Kenneth R. Johnston, and Kurt Fosso. The latest edition appeared in *Earlier Poems and Fragments, 1785-1797* (Cornell, 1998), edited by Jared Curtis and Carol Landon, and described by Duncan Wu as "the most accurate and carefully edited text of the poem that we are ever likely to have" (3). One can learn much about Wordsworth's evolving practice from this text, experimenting as he does with description, moral encomia, and personal reflection/retrospection inspired by Virgil's *Georgics* and contemporary Gothic and local color. Incomplete and underdeveloped as the poem is, it parleys an initiation whereby the young poet recognizes his poetic calling, as Jonathan Wordsworth first surmised in "Two Dark Interpreters: Wordsworth and De Quincey" (224).

Comprised of three major sections or movements in manuscript, the poem could be read as an anthology of visual and visionary scenes, as Landon and Curtis have remarked, but there is a certain cleverness about it that makes it more than discrete imitative exercises. The "argument," to adapt a Romantic convention, may be sketched hypothetically as follows:

View of Esthwaite—Superstition—Spirits, as Might Be Heard by a Minstrel—Mystic Twilight—Veil of Night—Melancholy—Power of Fancy—Storm Visions—Spectral Visitations—Remembrance of Grief following the Death of the Author's Father—Whispering Voice—Hope for Peace at the Close of Life—Faith in Friendship—Consolation in Nature and Memory—Homage to Native Region—Filial Love—Homage to a Friend.

These headings could be faithful to the poem as it exists in manuscript and as the young Wordsworth might have formulated them for *An Evening Walk* and *Descriptive Sketches* (both 1793). For all of the lapses or shifts in theme, tense, and tone, particularly in the third movement, a line runs through the first two movements, one that turns upon the young poet's place in literary tradition, which in turn impacts the final movement.

Wordsworth cleverly and self-consciously acknowledges over the course of the poem the literary tradition that precedes him, and gestures toward the origins of his own poetic calling with an opening verse paragraph that I call a "View of Esthwaite" (1-24) that foregrounds the georgic inquisitiveness inflecting the first section by describing some of "the landskip's varied treasure" (2). The narrator finds himself in the "gloomy glades" of "Superstition" (25 ff.), where "the ringing harp" of "druid Sons" (31-32), moves him to ask "Why roull on me your glaring eyes/Why fix on me for sacrifice" (33-34, echoing Wordsworth's *Irregular Fragment*). The question imparts a sense of foreboding, trading as the passage does in English druidic folklore. "Then musing onward would I stray/Till every rude sound died away," the speaker observes to lead off verse paragraphs that I have tagged "Spirits, as Might Be Heard by a Minstrel" (43 ff.), which exhibit further awareness of other English folklore along with a knowledge of Virgilian and contemporary poetics:

And oft as ceased the owl his song
That screamed the roofless walls among
Spirits yelling from their pains
And lashes loud and clanking chains
Were heard by minstrel led astray
Cold wading thro' the swampy way
Who as he flies the mingled moan
Deep sighs his harp with hollow groan
He starts the dismal sound to hear
Nor dares revert his eye for fear
Again his harp with thrilling chill
Shrieks at his shoulder sharp and shrill
Aghast he views, with eyes of fire
A grisly Phantom smite the wire. . . (51-64)

Wordsworth's poet turns briefly postmodern as he *rehearses* familiar images and motifs such as "Spirits yelling from their pains/And lashes loud and clanking chains" (like Beattie's *Minstrel* along with Virgil's *Aeneid*) that are germane to a "minstrel led astray" whose "harp" or sensibility is susceptible to a lively imagination, particularly when "fearful." He fears the evil that supposedly follows the "scream" of an owl, an omen, as Landon and Curtis note at a later recurrence of the image (432n) that applies equally as well here. The ironic distance for which Wordsworth strives is only imperfectly achieved, but seems to be deliberate, as in subsequent lines in which the speaker suggests that such gothicism is inspired by the sound of a "pebble . . . ginging" down on mountain-side, dislodged by a "flickering dove/[That] Broke from the rustling boughs above" or perhaps some "straggld sheep . . . starting wildly from its sleep," before the pebble falls "in the Rill below" (65-74). "Superstition" soon gives way to "Mystic Twilight" (75 ff.) once the speaker observes "Lone wandering oft by Esthwaite's [stream]/My soul has felt the mystic

dr[eam]" (75-76), and is followed by the "Veil of Night" (95 ff.) and "Melancholy" (123 ff.), as the poet settles into a pastoral repose typical of evening-twilight. The foregoing couplet, with its conjectural emendations of "[stream]" and "dr[eam]," offers an apt emblem for the young poet's eddying sensibility, not to mention his awareness of Virgil's verbal and sentimental legacies. Once in repose, he duly notes "o'er the heart we feel/A Tender Twilight softly steal" (127-28), reinforcing his self-conscious awareness of contemporary poeticisms. The vale features a topography of scenes and texts revisited, which offers a convenient cartography of Wordsworth's formative influences.

The "mystic dream" to which the young poet is given becomes manifest in the second movement of the poem, much as if the sense of foreboding articulated earlier was a portent, despite its ironic treatment afterward. Wordsworth restages images and motifs broached earlier in the poem in a manner reminiscent of Virgil in the *Georgics*.

As the second section opens with verse paragraphs that I have grouped under the heading "Power of Fancy" (133 ff.), an owl that "screams her song" (134) interrupts the poet's repose, and recalls the owl "That screamed the roofless walls among" in the first movement. The poet's gaze turns to a mansion during a storm, where the Gothic atmosphere exacerbates his "fear struck mind" (145). While "Pleasures of a softer kind" (178), such as the vale of Grasmere, also engage his developing imagination, the speaker gravitates toward some "Storm Visions" (191 ff.), as I have characterized the two verse paragraphs that follow, including the Gothic mansion calling to mind the "portraits" (205) in *The Castle of Otranto* along with some nondescript "daemons of the Storm" (211). The speaker flees, only to encounter a "Spectre" (219), which inspires the heading for the last verse paragraph of this movement, "Spectral Visitations" (215 ff.). "And on his feeble arm he bore/What seem'd the poet's harp of yore" (226-27), the poet observes, which recalls the minstrel upon whom he mused earlier.

He wav'd his hand and would have spoke
But from his trembling shadow broke
Faint murmuring sad and hollow moans
As if the wind sigh'd through his bones

— — — —

Now as we wandered through the gloom
In Black Helvellyn's inmost womb
The Spectre made a solemn stand
Slow round my head thrice waved his [hand]
And cleaved mine ears then swept his [lyre]
That shriek'd terrific shrill an[d] [dire]
Shudder'd the fiend. The vault a[lo]ng
Echoed the loud and dismal song.
'Twas done. The scene of woe was o'er
My breaking soul could bear no more. . . . (228-231, 242-51)

The poet finds himself in a situation eerily similar to the one involving the generic minstrel that he rehearsed earlier in the poem, only this time it is he who has the impressionable sensibility and lively imagination that is responsive to fear. Once his repose is interrupted by the scream of an owl, superstition and fear play upon his imagination, intriguingly enough, the force of which eventually summons a minstrel spectre whose intensity harrows the young poet. Once inside "Black Helvellyn's inmost womb," the young poet/minstrel generates a "scene of woe" befitting his embryonic imaginative impulse, along with a vision of the battle of Dunmail Raise and the "Ghosts" of Edmund of Saxony and Dunmail of Cumbria, as he mentions shortly afterward (261 ff.). While Wu and Hughes take the subterranean space of Helvellyn as a figure for the poetic imagination too, they emphasize the connection between death and creativity in Wordsworth. Grivil reads the moment as part of a druidic reverie, by contrast, which comprises a larger pattern of what he calls the poet's "bardic vocation" that informs his alternative account of Wordsworth's calling.

Wordsworth manages these Gothic effects through repetition primarily, describing the spectral, if conjectural, "lyre" as one "That shriek'd terrific shrill", echoing diction that he used to describe the generic minstrel that he mentioned in the first section of the poem—whose "harp with thrilling chill/Shrieks at his shoulder sharp and shrill"—as well as emulation, emphasizing a subterranean journey (like Williams's *Irregular Fragment* and John and Ann Letitia Aikin's fragment *Sir Bertrand*) and how the poet's "breaking soul could bear no more" (echoing Williams's *Peru* and *An American Tale*). The topography of scenes and texts revisited here and elsewhere in the poem points up the extent to which Wordsworth's poetic voice is veiled or muffled by the voices of his precursors and contemporaries.

By re-staging earlier images and motifs in a new context, Wordsworth gestures toward an initiation rite that becomes personal in the last movement of the poem. The poet characterizes the minstrel spectre as "my grisly guide" (256) late in the second section—akin to the "grisly Phantom" encountered by the generic minstrel, which further reinforces the parallel between the two episodes. Wordsworth's minstrel ascribes responsibility for the ghosts that he glimpses during the encounter to the minstrel spectre, and concludes with

With dismal yell and savage scowl
While Terror shapeless rides my soul
Full oft together are we hurl'd
Far Far amid the shadowy world—
[And since that hour the world unknown
The world of shades is all my own] (266-71)

The closing emendation, a marginal entry that Landon and Curtis consider tentative because it is not clear whether it should follow or replace lines 266-71, points up the world of the departed that preoccupies the speaker for much of the

[]
 They find a Tempe cool in every vale
 At languid noon the far off Heifer lows
 While calm in secret they repose
 Thither the tender charities retire
 There true Religion lights her purest fire
 On [1^r; cf. *Georgics* II.467-73]

Why in far cave twinkling with many a star
 []
 In Winter why so soon to th' Ocean stream
 Slopes the pale [weary] sun his westering team
 Why in her cave of Cloud so long remains

Lingers Night below th' horiz[on's] bou[nd]
 [2^r; cf. *Georgics* II.477, 481-82]

There let the deep'ning forest still and dead
 Hang in deep solemn twilight o'er my head
 Ah What god in that cool vale [my form will hide]
 Where H[ae]mus spreads her dark'ning umbrage wide
 Let me lie
 Far in some vale on H[ae]mus cool and high
 There let the deep'ning forest still and dead
 Hang in dim solemn twilight o'er my head
 [2^r; cf. *Georgics* II.485-89]²

As Wordsworth turns to lines concerning the georgic poet's secondary aspirations on 2^r, including the mountain range "H[ae]mus," the poet impresses something of his own descriptive technique by writing "There let the deep'ning forest still and dead/Hang in deep solemn twilight o'er my head," extending Virgil's description as Landon and Curtis note (618), superimposing an alternative emotional heft on Virgil's Greek place-names, deities, nymphs, and the Hellenic pastoral which he considers the contemplative poetic calling. Wordsworth uses Virgil's sentimental legacy as a touchstone in working toward his own singular descriptive-meditative idiom.

While Wordsworth's experiments encompass more than translations of the *Georgics* and *The Vale of Esthwaite* in the manuscripts of his juvenilia that survive, I believe he may be characterized as a Romantic humanist whose Virgilian muse is mediated by Virgil's 17th- and 18th-century British interpreters, whose descriptive, topographical, and prose modulations of the georgic yield figures of the poet such as bard, minstrel, empiricist, enthusiast, and wanderer, many of whom strive to build upon Virgil's verbal and sentimental legacies. And as Wordsworth experiments with georgic and pastoral topoi, along with sentimental topoi as the age of Sensibility unfolds, one can glimpse the beginnings of a new figure of the poet, who may be read as a confidante peeking out of *The Vale of Esthwaite*, and heralding the poet that is to come.

¹All quotations from *The Vale of Esthwaite* are from the Cornell edition of Wordsworth titled *Earlier Poems and Fragments, 1785-1797*, edited by Landon and Curtis. Their reading text of the poem proper is drawn from MS. A (signifying Dove Cottage MS. 3) and is considerably shorter than that in the earlier edition of the poem by De Selincourt, owing to a "misapprehension" that led the latter to proffer a significantly longer version collated from multiple manuscripts (407-21). Echoes of Milton, Thomson, Beattie, Thomas Gray, and Williams that have been documented by Landon and Curtis will be acknowledged parenthetically in my argument. In all quotes, italic emphases are added)

²My text of the translations is also from *Earlier Poems and Fragments, 1785-1797* by Landon and Curtis. Wordsworth does not translate this passage or others from Virgil systematically, interspersed as they are throughout DC MSS. 5, 6, and 7 with other lines of poetry.

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