

*Perhaps my pains might
be beguil'd'*

Grief was the making of Wordsworth. He had lost both parents by the age of 13. His mother had died in March 1778, perhaps of pneumonia, after an illness lasting two and a half months. His father died in December 1783 after spending a night without shelter when he became lost while returning home. The loss of one's parents in early life, by whatever means, has a profoundly formative influence on the psyche of the surviving child. A year later Wordsworth started writing in response to an assignment set by his teacher, William Taylor (who would die in June 1786). His earliest surviving poem dates from 1785, and a large quantity of material survives from his time at Hawkshead and Cambridge. Given the preoccupation with childhood in his later work, the testimony of the verse written during his teenage years might be thought worth attending to, yet critics have, for the most part, been chary of it. Indeed, it is one of the ironies of literary history that the juvenile writings of this poet have been passed over in favour of his mature observations on the growth of the human mind. This is the poet who believed that 'The Child is Father of the Man', and it is partly out of deference for that view that this study argues that the key to an understanding of Wordsworth is the poetry of his boyhood.

His roots remain under-appreciated partly because he is so frequently read in the latest version of his works, which includes the juvenilia only in much revised and truncated form.¹ Arguments over the various texts of Wordsworth's

¹ *Wordsworth: Poetical Works*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson, revised by Ernest de Selincourt (Oxford, 1904) remains in print, and is widely used. The section entitled 'Poems written in youth' includes a drastically revised, 14-line extract from 'The Vale of Esthwaite' (text of 1815), 'Calm is all nature as a resting wheel' (text of 1807), *An Evening Walk* ('original text of 1793') and *Descriptive Sketches* (text of 1849–50), along with 'Lines written while sailing in a boat at evening' and 'Remembrance of Collins' (both texts of 1798, though deriving from a single sonnet of 1789), 'Lines left upon a seat in a Yew-Tree' (composed 1797), 'Guilt and Sorrow' (text of 1842, though deriving from a poem written in 1793)

poems have tended to centre unhelpfully on issues of literary quality.² It is not that this is an uninteresting subject, but that the controversy has tended to obscure something more pressing: over-reliance on the latest lifetime text of 1849–50 hinders serious appreciation of Wordsworth's literary development. At least two major critical studies published within the last decade have quoted largely, if not exclusively, from the latest texts.³ I say this not to disparage them, but to suggest that no examination of Wordsworth's poetry can be fully sensitive to its nuances if it disregards early variants.

'The Vale of Esthwaite' was the most ambitious work of his schooldays, consisting of over 600 lines.⁴ It has attracted some attention, most notably from such scholars as Geoffrey Hartman, F. W. Bateson, James Averill and Kenneth Johnston, but remains little known. This marginality doubtless owes something to the fact that it was not published until 1940 when Ernest de Selincourt published selected juvenilia in the appendix to the first volume of his *Poetical Works of Wordsworth* – a relegation that indicated de Selincourt's unease about its status. This was entirely understandable. De Selincourt's professed aim was to supply a 'sound text' of 'the six-volume edition of 1849–50',⁵ which includes 'The Vale of Esthwaite' only in the form of a much revised 14-line extract. He would have admitted that by providing readers

and 'The Borderers' (text of 1842, deriving from a text of 1797–9). If there was any editorial rationale entailed in their assembly, it is not easy to work out. On the generic level, it contains works Wordsworth first composed between the ages of 17 and 29 (an unnervingly wide-ranging definition of 'youth'); on a scholarly level, it includes the earliest version of *An Evening Walk*, a poem revised right up to the final lifetime edition of 1849–50, alongside others taken directly from that final lifetime edition. There is no textual consistency to be found here.

² This is in no way to disparage the quality of the debate, which has been spirited and informed; see, for instance, S. M. Parrish, 'The Whig Interpretation of Literature', *TEXT* 4 (1988) 343–50 and Jack Stillinger, 'Textual Primitivism and the Editing of Wordsworth', *Studies in Romanticism* 28 (1989) 3–28. Some time before it began Stephen Gill spelt out the main issues in his 'Wordsworth's Poems: The Question of Text', *RES* 34 (1983) 172–89, and since summarized in his indispensable *Wordsworth: The Prelude* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 94–103.

³ See Thomas McFarland, *William Wordsworth: Intensity and Achievement* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992) and Marjean D. Purinton, *Romantic Ideology Unmasked* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1994). In fairness to these critics, they are clearly aware of the Cornell series, and on occasion refer to it, but for reasons of their own take de Selincourt as their primary source. In *Wordsworth's Great Period Poems* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) Marjorie Levinson also uses de Selincourt except for *The Prelude*, in which case she cites the Norton critical edition.

⁴ The question of the poem's length is addressed in detail by Curtis and Landon, *Cornell Early Poems*, 407–13.

⁵ De Selincourt's rationale is clearly explained, *PW* i p. v.

with something more substantial, he was going against the poet's own wishes. In 1997 Carol Landon and Jared Curtis published the most accurate and carefully edited text of the poem that we are ever likely to have, and it is a considerable wonder that it has, at the time of writing, received no critical attention and no review. The present study aims to demonstrate the centrality of the juvenilia to an appreciation of Wordsworth's mature work.

Curtis and Landon present a number of 'affinitive pieces' related to 'The Vale of Esthwaite', among them a description of several personified characters – Madness, Murder, Suicide, Despair and Horror. These stem from Wordsworth's enjoyment of Gothic literature, most notably Helen Maria Williams' 'Part of an Irregular Fragment, found in a dark passage of the Tower', in her *Poems* (1786).⁶ As a child, it is likely that he believed in ghosts, as a number were supposed to haunt the shores of Esthwaite Water;⁷ he would also have known of dilapidated Calgarth Hall on the banks of Windermere, and the two human skulls in one of its windows which, Thomas West reported in his *Guide to the Lakes* (1784), had been brought to the house by 'some ghost'.⁸ Besides being the height of literary fashion, Gothicism was an integral element of folk culture in the Lakes, and it is not surprising that when he first began to write Wordsworth practised his hand at spooky episodes. But there is something else here: from the very outset of his career this poet whose realm would be that of human psychology underpinned his interest in ghosts and spectres with an accompanying fascination with extreme mental states. These early Gothic passages should not therefore be read in isolation, as they have been, but as initiating an interest in the human mind which in the fullness of time would lead to the portraits of Jenny in 'A Somersetshire Tragedy', Margaret in 'The Ruined Cottage', the Sailor in 'Adventures on Salisbury Plain', Rivers in *The Borderers*, and such characters as Harry Gill and the mad mother. In these early fragments, which derive from lines originally written in spring 1787, Madness is 'half-clad', 'Leaning from a blasted tree':

He howled and through his shaggy hair
His green swoln eyes did grimly glare
Like tapers when the death bells sound
Expiring on the grass green ground

(Madness (c) 1–4)

⁶ See *WR* i 149.

⁷ See Thompson 262.

⁸ See Thomas West, *A Guide to the Lakes* (3rd edn, London, 1784), p. 64, which Wordsworth certainly knew (*WR* i 146–7). The skulls gave rise to a ballad which Wordsworth may have known; see Alexander Craig Gibson, *The Folk-Speech of Cumberland* (London, 1880), pp. 76–85.

Murder is 'Pale as the corse he slew'; Suicide 'in act to leap'; Horror's hand is 'dead-cold'.⁹ Each vignette has in common a fascination with death and extremity. In the *Prelude* Wordsworth would affectionately mock this tendency in his youthful self, softening it in retrospect as he recalled that for him, 'the Yew-tree had its Ghost / That took its station there for ornament.'¹⁰ That sepia-tinted view of his early writing fails either to provide it with a context or to make the necessary connection with the mature verse. In that sense, the critical downgrading and neglect of the juvenilia effectively began with Wordsworth himself.

Composition of 'The Vale of Esthwaite' fell into two parts. The first may be tentatively dated March–June 1787, and is characterized by a Gothic, occasionally sentimental manner modelled on such writers as Helen Maria Williams and Charlotte Smith.¹¹ The vignettes of Murder and Horror are typical. In the notebook in which he was working, Dove Cottage MS 3, that Gothic and sentimental style accounts for the first two-thirds of the poem, up to page 25.¹² At this point four pages are torn from the manuscript, and the poem resumes on the recto of page 30, marking its second phase, which can be dated to c. July 1787. What we find there is remarkable in the context of the later poetry: it recalls the early evening of 19 December 1783; the 13-year-old Wordsworth waits above Hawkshead on the ridge north of Borwick Lodge, a mile and a half from his school, for a horse to take him and his brothers, Richard and John, home for the holidays:

No spot but claims the tender tear
 By joy or grief to memory dear
 One Evening when the wintry blast
 Through the sharp Hawthorn whistling pass'd
 And the poor flocks all pinch'd with cold
 Sad drooping sought the mountain fold
 Long Long upon yon steepy rock
 Alone I bore the bitter shock
 Long Long my swimming eyes did roam
 For little Horse to bear me home
 To bear me what avails my tear
 To sorrow o'er a Father's bier.

(*'The Vale of Esthwaite'* 272–83)

⁹ Cornell *Early Poems* 534–9.

¹⁰ *The Thirteen-Book Prelude* viii 528–9.

¹¹ Important influences include Smith's *Elegiac Sonnets* (first published 1784). See *WR* i 127–8, 149–50; Cornell *Early Poems* 419.

¹² I follow the pagination given by Landon and Curtis; see Cornell *Early Poems* 163.

No spot but claims the tender tear
By joy or grief to memory dear
One evening when the wintry blast
I through the sharp Howl than what then is felt
And the poor flock's all punctured with cold
I and drooping sought the giant's fold
Long Long upon your ^{steeple} rocky
Alone I bow the better stack
Long long my swimming eyes did beam
On little house to bear me home
To bear me what avails my tear
To sorrow o'er a Father's beer.
How or in vain thou hast not flow'd
But ead me of an heavy load
For much it gives my ^{own} soul relief
To pay the night by debt of Grief
With sighs repeated o'er and o'er
I mourn because I mourn no more
For ^{as the} ^{long} ^{soon} ^{years}
Nor did my little heart grieve
The lost a home in losing thee
Nor did it know of this bereft
That little more than Heaven was left
Than his to the voice in whistled sweet
What says we soon again shall meet
For of it when fades the tender day
To you concurring hail a pray
Do how afar the midnight bell
Whings on mine ear its solemn knell
A still voice whispers to my heart
As soon shall be with them that rest
Then, may sore hand an pious friend
Absiduous o'er my body bend.

Figure 1. DC MS 3, 30r. 'The Vale of Esthwaite'; 'No spot but claims the tender tear . . . ?
Wordsworth's first attempt at the waiting for the horse episode, dating from c. July 1787.

The clunk of Wordsworth's tetrameter couplets is evidence of a self-conscious literariness underlined by their allusive manner. The 'whistling' of the wind through the hawthorn is doubly resonant, echoing both *King Lear* and James 'Ossian' Macpherson's *Temora*, where the sleeping highlanders 'thought they heard the voice of the dead. This voice of the dead, however, was perhaps no more than a shriller whistle of the winds in an old tree.'¹³ The additional echo of Poor Tom's 'Through the sharp hawthorn blow the [cold] winds'¹⁴ makes it peculiarly evocative. An acute sensitivity to nature, and its ability to accommodate our sense of the dead, is combined with the knowledge of human vulnerability before the cold, unsympathetic wind. Nature is already in this early composition a strangely divided thing, capable of both sympathy and indifference. That duality is underlined by the original reading of 'steepy rock' which in the manuscript is 'naked'.¹⁵

On a banal level such intimations could be explained away by the suggestion that Wordsworth was aware by the time he waited that his father was mortally ill – as indeed he probably was. But this should not obscure the important anachronism: at the time Wordsworth waited for the horses, John Wordsworth Sr was *not yet dead*. What has happened is that in retrospect the poet has anticipated his father's death, incorporating it into the 'bitter shock' of the wind and his 'swimming eyes' – as, in the present (of 1787), he feels the abandonment of an orphan. The flocks 'Sad drooping', the 'sharp Hawthorn' and the 'wintry blast' are all emotional indices of the child's state of mind in the here and now, rather than an objectively realized account of the past.

That elision of the past (1783) with the present (1787) implies some connection between the two, elucidated in the lines that follow. Without warning, Wordsworth switches from the scene above Borwick Lodge to the moment of composition, summer 1787:

Flow on, in vain thou hast not flow'd
 But eas'd me of a heavy load
 For much it gives my soul relief
 To pay the mighty debt of Grief
 With sighs repeated o'er and o'er
 I mourn because I mourn'd no more
 For ah! the storm was soon at rest
 Soon broke the Sun upon my breast

¹³ James Macpherson, *Temora: an ancient epic poem, with several other poems translated from the Galic language* (1763), p. 79. See WR i 92.

¹⁴ *King Lear* III iv 46–7.

¹⁵ See Cornell *Early Poems* 447.

Nor did my little heart foresee
– She lost a home in losing thee
Nor did it know – of thee bereft
That little more than Heav'n was left.

(ll. 284–95)

With that shift in tense, 'Flow on', the poetry turns its attention to the 'now' of 1787, three and a half years later, when Wordsworth found himself still in tears. The implied continuum between the 'bitter shock' of his father's death and what he experiences today is argued without self-indulgence: 'For much it gives my soul relief / To pay the mighty debt of Grief.' He may be recalling the stoicism of Jonson's 'On My First Son' – 'Seven years wert thou lent to me, and I thee pay, / Exacted by thy fate, on the just day' (ll. 3–4) – where the mercantile imagery suppresses an anguish that threatens constantly to erupt. But there is no sense of the repression we sense so powerfully in Jonson; instead, Wordsworth candidly assesses his response to his father's demise. He explicitly welcomes the tears he sheds now, in July 1787, as they relieve him of a 'debt of Grief' not fully rendered when he followed his father's coffin to its resting-place in Cockermonth churchyard. The 'sighs repeated o'er and o'er' appear to express feelings of culpability, even guilt, for not having adequately lamented in 1783: 'I mourn because I mourn'd no more.' That line reworks the final line of Gray's 'Sonnet on the Death of Richard West': 'And weep the more, because I weep in vain'.¹⁶ It is a clever allusion to a work also concerned with the failure of grief adequately to express the pain of bereavement. There is guilt too in the renewed awareness that only now does Wordsworth understand the full consequences: he 'lost a home in losing thee'. This section of the 'Vale' strives to define what 'home' means, and to seek reparation for its dissolution. (In actual fact the Wordsworth children had lost their home, which had been sold with all its contents, together with John Wordsworth's land holdings, by May 1784.)

Everything here is markedly different from what precedes it – no Gothic spectres, no castles, no personified horrors. Instead of mimicking literary idioms, Wordsworth explores an inner landscape which follows the contours of his own psyche. Between the first period of composition (March–June 1787) and the second (July), some change occurred within him that turned the 'Vale' from a literary exercise into something more personal.

The explanation lies in a letter from Dorothy Wordsworth to her best friend,

¹⁶ Wordsworth famously criticized the sonnet in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, but it is worth bearing in mind that he exempted lines 13–14 from reproach.

Jane Pollard, dating from late July 1787.¹⁷ This is the earliest surviving letter by either Wordsworth or his sister, but it has not always had the attention it deserves. Since their father's death Dorothy had been living with her Aunt Threlkeld in Halifax, but in May 1787 she was transplanted to her Cookson grandparents in Penrith. The Cooksons lived over their draper's shop in the market-place, and regarded the Wordsworth children as jumped-up. It gave them a self-righteous gratification to set Dorothy menial duties about the house and speak ill of her brothers. Besides anything else, they resented the money which the orphaned Wordsworths cost them. On its own this would probably have had little effect on her brother's poetry; the catalyst came at the end of the Hawkshead summer term. This would be a momentous reunion for the Wordsworth children. Dorothy had been only 6 when she had last seen her brothers and was now 14½. It would be almost like meeting for the first time. The Hawkshead term having ended on 20 June, Dorothy expected her brothers to be sent horses immediately so as to join her, but this did not happen, as she explained to Jane Pollard:

I was for a whole week kept in expectation of my Brothers, who staid at school all that time after the vacation begun owing to the ill-nature of my Uncle who would not send horses for them because when they wrote they did not happen to mention them, and only said when they should break up which was always before sufficient. This was the beginning of my mortifications for I felt that if they had had another home to go to, they would have been behaved to in a very different manner, and received with more chearful countenances, indeed nobody but myself expressed one wish to see them, at last however they were sent for, but not till my Brother Wm had hired a horse for himself and came over because he thought some one must be ill . . . (ET 3-4)

The breathless, helter-skelter rhythms of Dorothy's narrative testify to the turbulent emotions underlying it. Though resident in Penrith for less than two months, she was now aware of the contempt in which she and her brothers were held by their Uncle, Christopher Crackanthorpe Cookson.¹⁸ The delay in sending horses was its most eloquent testimony to date; what Cookson may not have realized is that it reiterated the circumstances preceding the death of John Wordsworth Sr. As in 1783, William seems to have been stranded in Hawkshead when he was desperate to leave. Such was his anxiety that he

¹⁷ The connection with Dorothy's letter was first pointed out by F. W. Bateson, *Wordsworth: A Re-Interpretation* (2nd edn, London: Longman, 1956), pp. 50-3, though critics and biographers have been slow to accept it.

¹⁸ Christopher Crackanthorpe Cookson (20 May 1745-Oct. 1799) who, on 17 July 1792, changed his surname to Crackanthorpe.

was compelled to hire a horse on his own behalf 'because he thought some one must be ill'. Dorothy is eloquent, but we may infer the elision of a good deal of mental and emotional anguish in her narrative.

It may be fair to say that the Wordsworth children had to some extent been cushioned from the full emotional impact of their orphaning in 1783. Dorothy had been looked after by kindly relatives (the family of her 'Aunt', Elizabeth Threlkeld), and her brothers had enjoyed the security provided by Ann Tyson and their school. Their ill-treatment by the unfeeling Cooksons would have provided a sudden and unwelcome reminder of their vulnerability, and re-awakened the grief that had lain dormant since their father's death:

Many a time have Wm, J, C, and myself shed tears together, tears of the bitterest sorrow, we all of us, each day, feel more sensibly the loss we sustained when we were deprived of our parents, and each day do we receive fresh insults, you will wonder of what sort; believe me of the most mortifying kind; the insults of servants . . . (ET 3)

The Wordsworths, who during their parents' lives had occupied the grandest house in Cockermouth, would have felt the humiliation acutely – one undoubtedly sanctioned, and probably encouraged, by their uncle.¹⁹ He seems to have resented their social status, and took pleasure in rubbing their noses in the fact that they were now dependent on him. There is no escaping the fact that this letter – a brilliantly articulated account of the Wordsworth children's state at this moment – is about grief, 'tears of the bitterest sorrow', and what it means to lose a home: 'I felt that if they had had another home to go to, they would have been behaved to in a very different manner, and received with more chearful countenances.' The new and unwelcome insight of the moment was precisely that they did *not* have another home to go to. They were dependent on people who thought of them as burdensome. However devoted they had been to their parents while alive, that revelation cannot but have made them feel blameworthy for not having previously understood the consequences of their parents' deaths. The resulting guilt would have been shared, and it explains why 'Wm, J, C, and myself shed tears together.' She emphasizes that this act of expiation has taken place 'Many a time' since her brothers' arrival from Hawkshead a month or so previously (they probably joined her in late June).

¹⁹ From what Dorothy says in her letter it is clear that the servants were not discouraged from insulting the Wordsworth children. Of her grandfather, Dorothy observes that he 'never speaks to us but when he scolds which is not seldom' (ET 4). This is a reference to William Cookson, whose bad temper may be accounted for by ill health; he died on 19 December that year at the age of 76.

As the mind created its fictions of reproach, it must have seemed to Dorothy, John, Christopher and William that the 'mighty debt' had accumulated partly through their ignorance, and that now, three and a half years later, it demanded restitution in a more complete, if delayed, act of expiation: 'I mourn because I mourn'd no more.' There is no reason to suppose that the Wordsworth children genuinely had anything to feel guilty about; their only crime was to have been innocent victims of their relatives' cruelty and vindictiveness. In her letter Dorothy repeatedly emphasizes their fresh understanding of what their parents' loss meant:

We have been told thousands of times that we were liars but we treat such behaviour with the contempt it deserves. [We] always finish our conversations which generally take a melancholy turn, with wishing we had a father and a home. Oh! Jane, I hope it may be long ere you experience the loss of your parents, but till you feel that loss you will never know how dear to you your Sisters are . . . (EY5)

She observes that their hardships have brought her closer to her brothers than before – even to the point of suggesting to Jane that she will not fully appreciate her sisters until they too have been orphaned. Though new, that terrible understanding would never go away. Nearly six years later, in February 1793, Dorothy again told Jane that 'We in the same moment lost a father, a mother, a home,'²⁰ as if it had only just occurred. The mantra is repeated, with the same shocked numbness, almost word for word, in 'The Vale of Esthwaite': 'Nor did my little heart foresee / – She lost a home in losing thee' (ll. 292–3). The verbal echo is so close as to suggest either that Wordsworth had read Dorothy's letter or that the poem influenced her. Whichever way the influence operated, it shows how close William and Dorothy had become by July 1787.

As the correspondence with Jane Pollard suggests, Dorothy and William were traumatized by the delayed mourning of July 1787, and the circumstances that precipitated it, but it was an experience that brought dividends. For one thing, they discovered each other as if for the first time. It also sealed the bond with John and Christopher – though not with Richard, who was not party to it.²¹ As Dorothy told Jane, 'I can bear the ill nature of all my relations,

²⁰ EY88.

²¹ Richard had been articled to his cousin, Richard Wordsworth of Branthwaite (1752–1816), since February 1786. He remained with him until early 1789, when he moved to London, where he worked for his cousin's London attorneys, Parkin and Lambert at Gray's Inn.

for the affection of my brothers consoles me in all my Griefs.²² Again, it seems likely that Wordsworth read this declaration before composing the concluding lines of the 'Vale', which address Dorothy, and follow shortly after the admission that 'I must never prove / A tender parent's guardian Love' (ll. 366–7):

Sister for whom I feel a love
That²³ warms a Brother far above
On you as sad she marks the scen[e]
Why does my heart so fondly lean
Why but because in you is giv'n
All all my soul could wish from heav'n
Why but because I fondly view
All, all that heav'n has claim'd in you.
(*'The Vale of Esthwaite'* 380–7)

Like much else in this section of the poem, these lines look forward to the later poetry, most notably the blessing of Dorothy in 'Tintern Abbey'. But where that blessing would be offered as a consolation, these early lines show Dorothy tending Wordsworth's emotional needs. Stripped of the protection of a father and a home, he finds that 'in you is giv'n / All all my soul could wish from heav'n.' Wordsworth famously puns on Dorothy's name in *The Prelude*, when he describes her as 'A gift then first bestow'd',²⁴ but was already at it in his schoolboy verse: as a 'gift of God', she was indeed 'from heav'n'. Again, the testimonial is witty in the Jonsonian sense,²⁵ in that the wordplay coyly deflects attention from the emotional subtext, while acknowledging Dorothy's indispensability.

Her presence is keenly felt as the draft moves towards its conclusion. It is full of insights doubtless drawn from conversation with her, and may have been composed in her presence. Dorothy was probably the first reader of it and was, from Wordsworth's point of view, his ideal reader. The near confla-

²² *ET* 3.

²³ Landon and Curtis read 'What', which is what Wordsworth appears to have written. He would have known that it was ungrammatical, and I'm sure meant 'That', a correction I have preferred to make. See figure 2 overleaf.

²⁴ *The Thirteen-Book Prelude* vi 218. Perhaps recalling the *Prelude* reference, De Quincey exploited the pun in his 'Autobiographic Sketches': 'Properly, and in a spirit of prophecy, was she named *Dorothy*; in its Greek meaning, *gift of God*, well did this name prefigure the relation in which she stood to Wordsworth, the mission with which she was charged' (*Selections Grave and Gay* (14 vols, Edinburgh, 1853–60), ii 307–8).

²⁵ 'Farewell, thou child of my right hand', the opening phrase in Jonson's 'On My First Son', puns on the child's name, Benjamin, which in Hebrew means 'dexterous'.

No when a ball his darling by
 Toss'd upward by some watchful boy
 Made in its quick declining course
 The well known hand that gave it force
 Spring up again with feeble bound
 Then softer falls upon the ground
 Sister for whom I feel a love
 That warms a brother far above
 Oh how you as sad she marks the tear
 How goes my heart so fondly torn
 Why but because in you is join'd
 All all my soul could wish from heav'n
 To see her, because I fondly view
 All that heav'n has claim'd in you

What from the social chain can tear
 This bosom link'd far every part
 Which feels wherever the hand of heav'n
 Connects the heav'n connect'd chain.
 To feel, as though the deities still
 Were count'ing heav'n shall heav'n learn
 Of heav'n's that will not see in heav'n
 Till then shall live the holy flame
 Whence that and heav'n are the same

Figure 2. DC MS 3, 31v. 'The Vale of Esthwaite': 'Sister for whom I feel a love / That warms a Brother far above . . .' Wordsworth's first poetic apostrophe to Dorothy, c. July 1787.

tion of the waiting for the horses episode of 1783 with the grieving of summer 1787 alludes to the malignity of their Uncle Kit, and the delay in William's return that July. None of this is spelt out; indeed, the allusive manner (characteristic of the mature poet) is probably designed to prevent prying eyes from working it out. The only people who could have done so were the Wordsworth children. There was one other contemporary reader to whom Wordsworth addressed himself: John Fleming, a schoolfriend at Hawkshead, who would turn up again in *The Prelude*.²⁶ After declaring his love for Dorothy, Wordsworth turns to him:

While bounteous Heav'n shall Fleming leave
Of Friendship [?what] can me bereave
Till then shall burn the holy flame
Friendship and Fleming are the same.

(ll. 394–7)

The guilt that underlies the waiting for the horses episode is mitigated in part by Fleming, whose fidelity leaves the poet 'unbereaved'. Wordsworth chooses his words with care. The movement of the verse is restorative, healing. If 'The Vale of Esthwaite' began as an attempt to out-Gothicize the Goths, the delayed mourning of July 1787 turned it into a deeply personal investigation of grief, guilt and restitution. Without being fully aware of it, Wordsworth traced an emotional course that would compel him for the rest of his poetic career.

Take, for instance, 'The Character of the Happy Warrior', where the warrior is a man

Who, doom'd to go in company with Pain
And Fear, and Bloodshed, miserable train!
Turns his necessity to glorious gain;
In face of these doth exercise a power
Which is our human-nature's highest dower;
Controls them and subdues, transmutes, bereaves
Of their bad influence, and their good receives . . .

(ll. 12–18)

Wordsworth's allusion to the recently completed *Prelude*, in which the 'mighty mind' exerts its influence on 'the outward face of things, / So molds them and endues, abstracts, combines',²⁷ indicates that the power attributed to the

²⁶ See *The Two-Part Prelude* ii 380–8; Fleming is discussed by Johnston, *Hidden Wordsworth* 50–1 and T. W. Thompson, *Wordsworth's Hawkshead* 117n1.

²⁷ *Thirteen-Book Prelude* xiii 77–9.

warrior is that of imagination. This may at first appear surprising; after twentieth-century experiences of war, no modern poet would make such claims. But soldiering was the profession for which Wordsworth described himself as 'most inclined and . . . best qualified',²⁸ and consistent with this was his delight at Landor's departure in 1808 to fight alongside the Spanish army.²⁹ Indeed, Wordsworth's support of the freedom fighters tells us a good deal about his attitude towards warfare. Like Byron (oddly enough), he thought of active service as a practical application of his political beliefs. For that reason the happy warrior is an opponent of injustice and oppression, gifted with extraordinary ability. Not only can he transmute Pain and Fear and Bloodshed, but in doing so he 'bereaves / Of their bad influence, and their good receives'. That remark echoes his praise of Fleming, whose saving grace left Wordsworth unbereaved at the end of the 'Vale'; likewise, the happy warrior turns bereavement into a positive – even imaginative – process. It is required because the true subject of 'The Character of the Happy Warrior' is not Nelson but John Wordsworth, whose drowning in February 1805 left William and Dorothy grief-stricken for the first time since 1783. As William reported to Christopher, they reacted in the same way as before: 'We have done all that could be done to console each other by weeping together.'³⁰ In all likelihood, it brought back many of the painful emotions associated with their parents' deaths, and must have reawakened the need to expiate them. Part of that process was the composition of poetry, and specifically 'The Recluse'; as Stephen Gill has pointed out, John's death turned its completion into 'a trust, made sacred by his brother's death'.³¹ Like grief itself, 'The Recluse' was a duty that demanded payment.

Wordsworth learnt other lessons through the new direction his poetry took in July 1787. The waiting for the horses episode reveals that from an early stage he understood the tension between memories and apparently unrelated emotions. Such details as the whistling wind, the naked rock and solitary sheep are ingredients in the mysterious alchemy that will resolve grief into imaginative energy. Just how precocious Wordsworth was in arguing this can be gauged by the fact that over a century later Sigmund Freud 'discovered' the same phenomenon, which he called a 'screen memory'. In a particularly resonant passage in 'Screen Memories' (1899), Freud observed that 'there are some people whose earliest recollections of childhood are concerned with everyday

²⁸ *MY* ii 2.

²⁹ See Peter Mann, 'Two Unpublished Letters of Robert Southey', *N&Q* NS 22 (1975) 397–9.

³⁰ *EY* 543.

³¹ Gill 241.

and indifferent events which could not produce any emotional effect even in children, but which are recollected (*too* clearly, one is inclined to say) in every detail'. These are 'screens' for more important, associated experiences:

What is recorded as a mnemonic image is not the relevant experience itself. . . what is recorded is another psychical element closely associated with the objectionable one The result of the conflict is that, instead of the mnemonic image which would have been justified by the original event, another is produced which has been to some degree associately displaced from the former one. And since the elements of the experience which aroused objection were precisely the important ones, the substituted memory will necessarily lack those important elements and will in consequence strike us as trivial.³²

Memories dating from the same period as the events they screen are 'contiguous',³³ and as an example Freud offers that of a professor of philology 'whose earliest memories showed him a basin of ice. At the same period there occurred the death of his grandmother, which was a severe blow to the child. But he has no recollection of the bereavement; all that he remembers is the basin of ice.' Even at the age of 16, Wordsworth's self-analysis is sophisticated enough for us to read him in these terms. The repression of grief for his father at the time of his death in 1783 – the 'objectionable' experience, as Freud might call it – has led to 'associative displacement' in favour of the 'substituted' memory of the landscape above Borwick Lodge.

I am not attempting a Freudian exposition of Wordsworth; others have done that, and with greater expertise.³⁴ I wish merely to suggest that the shift of gear detectable in Wordsworth's poetry from July 1787 was the result of a searching and poised act of self-examination – all the more remarkable for anticipating Freudian psychology by over a hundred years. Suppose, for a moment, that Freud had been at Wordsworth's right hand as he composed the final section of the 'Vale' in 1787, could he have elucidated the poetry in terms that would have made sense to its author? It seems unlikely. One of the hallmarks of Freud's account of screen memories is that it exploits linguistic

³² *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud* ed. James Strachey and Anna Freud (24 vols, London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1953–74), iii 305–7.

³³ The naming of different kinds of memory according to their chronological relation to the events they screen occurs in 'Childhood and Screen Memories'; Freud, *Works* vi (1960).

³⁴ A number of distinguished critics, from Richard Onorato to David Ellis, have pointed out the similarity of Freud's screen memories to Wordsworth's spots of time. See also Douglas B. Wilson, *The Romantic Dream: Wordsworth and the Poetics of the Unconscious* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), pp. 40–1.

counters and concepts that did not become widely understood until the twentieth century. For all the parallels in their thinking, Wordsworth and Freud (even in translation) speak different languages. Had Wordsworth in July 1787 been forced to discuss his poetry in terms that would have made sense to contemporaries, he would have spoken of 'associationism'.

The mind's tendency to associate places and emotions was widely discussed during Wordsworth's boyhood. David Hartley established an entire philosophy on the 'faculty', which was to be an important influence on Joseph Priestley and, through him, Coleridge. It is not likely that Wordsworth knew of Hartley at Hawkshead, but he had almost certainly encountered the philosophical writings of James Beattie. In his day Beattie was best known as a philosopher; he was a Professor of Moral Philosophy and Logic by the age of 25, and publication of his *Essay on Truth* in 1770 won extravagant praise (not least from Priestley) and the award of a yearly £200 pension from George III. As a schoolboy Wordsworth knew Beattie's poem *The Minstrel*, which influenced 'The Vale of Esthwaite',³⁵ and probably read his *Dissertations Moral and Critical* (1783), parts of which were extracted in periodicals. The *Dissertations* contains an important chapter on imagination:

The sight of a place in which we have been happy or unhappy, renews the thoughts and the feelings that we formerly experienced there. With what rapture, after long absence, do we revisit the haunts of our childhood, and early youth! A thousand ideas, which had been for many years forgotten, now crowd upon the Imagination, and revive within us the gay passions of that romantick period. The same effect is produced, though perhaps in a fainter degree, when in a foreign land we talk of, or recollect, the place of our nativity. And from these, and other Associations of a like nature, arises in part that most important principle, the love of our country; whereof the chief objects are, our friends, and fellow-citizens . . . a fondness for the very fields and mountains, the vales, rocks, and the rivers, which formed the scenery of our first amusements and adventures.³⁶

That Wordsworth waited twice for the horses, in 1783 and 1787, is elided in the poem and easily overlooked. But Beattie's comments remind us that the corresponding episode in the 'Vale' is inspired by a return visit to 'a place in which we have been happy or unhappy'. The key to screen memories lies in that distinctively Freudian concept of repression; Beattie provides an eighteenth-century substitute for this mechanism when he suggests that the return to the ridge above Borwick Lodge revived 'A thousand ideas, which had been

³⁵ WR i 10–11.

³⁶ James Beattie, *Dissertations Moral and Critical* (London, 1783), p. 87.

for many years forgotten'. Whatever else it is about, the waiting for the horses episode in the 'Vale' is concerned with feelings that its narrator had 'forgotten'. Significantly, Wordsworth had not previously written about his parents; nowhere in the considerable collection of extant verse composed between 1785 and July 1787 does he mention them. Circumstances had detained him and his siblings from a full expression of grief, and there was a price to be paid for that. The return to the ridge reiterated the events of December 1783 and brought about a confrontation with emotions suppressed since his father's death. He and his brothers remained in Hawkshead until, as Dorothy reveals, he 'hired a horse for himself and came over because he thought some one must be ill'. That reflects a genuine anxiety about her, while indicating something of his personal distress at the time.

Although Beattie declares an interest in 'happy or unhappy' experiences in the past, the main thrust of his argument concerns favourable associations that give rise to a 'love of our country'. So it is that, in lines that follow those describing the wait for the horses, Wordsworth envisages his return to the Lake District in old age and an encounter with a young boy.

Perhaps my pains might be beguil'd
By some fond vacant-gazing child
He the long wondrous tale would hear
Without a proud fastidious ear
And while I wandered round the vale
[From] every rock would hang a tale.
With equal prattling half as dear
Call tale from tale and tear from tear³⁷ . . .

(*'The Vale of Esthwaite'* 348–53)

So closely does this follow Beattie that it is hard to believe that Wordsworth did not have him in mind as he wrote. Within the space of twenty lines he will go on to celebrate his affection for 'our friends, and fellow-citizens' in the form of Dorothy and Fleming, but before he does so he describes his 'fondness for the very fields and mountains, the vales, rocks, and the rivers, which formed the scenery of our first amusements and adventures'. As in Beattie, the landscape assumes importance from its associations: 'And while I wandered round the vale / [From] every rock would hang a tale.' This is decisive in resolving the poem's thematic argument, for the same mechanism that had

³⁷ The Cornell editors omit the last couplet from their reading text. My examination of the manuscript suggests that it is contemporary with the original draft, and that being undeleted it is not an alternative reading but part of the main text. I therefore include it here. Cf. Cornell *Early Poems* 450–1.

led to the reawakened grief of 1787 leads to renewed affection for the countryside. This is not, after all, a poem about the destructive effects of early trauma; on the contrary – Wordsworth envisages himself as an old man weeping with emotion as he recalls the past, a process that, as he claims, ‘beguiles’ his ‘pain’.

Associationism is so fundamental to Coleridge’s thought, and much that Wordsworth wrote after 1798, that it is sometimes implied, if not stated, that he knew nothing about it before he met Coleridge. That could not be more wrong. It is present in his thinking from at least July 1787, and would resurface frequently in the poetry of succeeding years. One of the revelations of the juvenilia, irrespective of their literary merit, is that they contain, in advanced form, many of the concepts associated with Wordsworth’s post-Coleridgean work. The price of their comparatively late admission to the canon has been a widespread failure to appreciate his intellectual precocity. No doubt ‘The Recluse’ and *The Prelude* were uniquely the product of Coleridge’s influence, but they are also the culmination of an aesthetic talent predicated by ‘The Vale of Esthwaite’.

Wordsworth seems to have lost heart in the ‘Vale’ shortly after drafting the address to Dorothy. The manuscript has scorch marks on some leaves and burns along its edges. We can only conjecture as to why. It would have been monstrous had Uncle Kit thrown it to the flames, though it was not beyond him to have done such a thing. He probably did not wish to encourage any thought his nephew might have of writing poetry, and would hardly have been delighted by the later passages of the ‘Vale’. But it is more likely that the notebook was thrown on the fire by Wordsworth himself and rescued by his sister. He had reason to feel dissatisfied, no doubt aware by the time he had finished of the clumsiness of the Gothic and sentimental passages. If so, he was overlooking the achievement of the last 120 odd lines. At any rate, whatever disappointment he may have felt with the poem would have been temporary.

Until publication of the Cornell edition in 1997, it was known only to a handful of scholars that when copying extracts from the ‘Vale’ at Cambridge in 1788, Wordsworth titled one of them ‘Vale longum vale’.³⁸ The Latin pun reminds us that the poem announces Wordsworth’s temporary farewell to the Lake District. (It was concluded during his last vacation before leaving for Cambridge.) The title of the extract, exclusive to that fair copy, indicates that from the vantage-point of 1788 he understood the poem to have concluded an important episode in his creative and emotional development. He now understood how to write directly about important events in his personal life;

³⁸ Cornell *Early Poems* 492.

and on an emotional level, he had begun to resolve the grief arising from his parents' deaths. The fair copy extracts he made from the scorched manuscript in 1788 fill about a quarter of his substantial Cambridge notebook (DC MS 2), so that he must, by then, have felt quite pleased with it. In 1797 Coleridge would read the poem and allude to it in 'The Ancient Mariner',³⁹ and in 1799 Wordsworth returned to it when composing the spots of time passage for the two-part *Prelude*. In 1815 he published a brief extract with his collected poems, which was all that would come to public notice until 1940.⁴⁰ While it would always remain an incoherent, episodic and fragmentary work, 'The Vale of Esthwaite' can only have increased in significance with the passage of time.

³⁹ Coleridge drew on the 'Vale' in 'The Ancient Mariner' and therefore must have had access to DC MS 3 between July and November 1797; see '*The Ancient Mariner*: A Wordsworthian Source', *N&Q* 38 (1991) 301.

⁴⁰ 'Extract from the conclusion of a Poem, Composed upon leaving School', to be found in *PWi* 2.