

WORDSWORTH AND LANDSCAPE

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‘How pleasant, as the sun declines, to view

The spacious landscape change in form and hue!’

An Evening Walk (version of 1836), lines 97–98

English landscape was always changing. In this couplet from the final version of a poem first published in 1793, Wordsworth not only alters the wording of the original to stress the mutability of landscape (which in the original simply ‘shines’); he also illustrates how the meaning of the word had changed since the early seventeenth century, when—like the Dutch *landschap*—it denoted ‘a picture representing natural inland scenery’ (OED). By the middle of the eighteenth century, when Thomas Gray begins his ‘Elegy on a Country Churchyard’ (1751) by describing a ‘glimmering landscape’ of fading light, the word had come to mean ‘a view or prospect of natural inland scenery, such as can be taken in at a glance from one point of view’ (OED). But the pictorial meaning of *landscape* never died. It remained very much alive in the literature of the picturesque, in books about what William Gilpin—acclaimed in his own time as ‘the venerable founder and master of the Picturesque School’—called ‘that peculiar kind of beauty, which is agreeable in a picture.’¹

Since Wordsworth owned Gilpin's *Observations* on the picturesque beauties of the lake district (1786) and cites another of his books in a note on *An Evening Walk*, line 317 (CEW 68), Wordsworth's conception of landscape was surely inflected by Gilpin's concept of the picturesque. But Gilpin's concept of the picturesque—of what makes a tract of land pictorially 'agreeable'—verges on downright self-contradiction. On the one hand, writing of 'the picturesque eye' in his *Observations* on the lake district, Gilpin declares that it 'seeks a nature untamed by art, and bursting wildly into all its irregular forms'.² On the other hand, in the very first book of his *Observations* (1782), he had already explained that he would examine nature '*by the rules of picturesque beauty*',³ and in applying those rules, Gilpin seeks a nature tamed by art, a nature whose irregular forms have been carefully regulated by the principles of pictorial composition. In the very book which salutes the picturesqueness of a nature 'untamed by art', he writes of northern England:

it cannot be supposed that every scene, which these countries present, is *correctly picturesque*. In such immense bodies of rough-hewn matter, many irregularities, many deformities, must exist, which a practiced eye would wish to correct. . . .

In all these cases, the imagination is apt to whisper, What glorious Scenes might be made here, if these stubborn materials could yield to the judicious hand of art. (Gilpin, *Lakes* 1: 3)

Insofar as landscape was pictorial, then, it was something distinct from nature, something mentally composed by a viewer familiar with the art of painting and its rules, and probably also with the precepts of Gilpin and other writers on the picturesque. At least a few of what may seem—at first—Wordsworth's most original formulations reflect their influence. Take for instance the quatrain about sunset from 'The Tables Turned':

The sun, above the mountain's head

A freshening lustre mellow

Through all the long green fields has spread

His first sweet evening yellow. (*PW* 4: 57)

In the spring of 1798, about the time Wordsworth wrote these lines, Hazlitt admiringly recorded the kind of perception that stood behind it: 'Wordsworth, looking out of the low, latticed window, said, 'How beautifully the sun sets on that yellow bank.' I thought within myself, 'With what eyes these poets see nature!'⁴ But Wordsworth's eyes were hardly innocent. They had been trained by the reading of poems such as James Thomson's 'Spring' (1728), where the light of a setting sun breaks through the clouds,

strikes

Th' illumined mountain, through the forest streams,

. . . and in a yellow mist

Far smoking o'er the interminable plain,

In twinkling myriads lights the dewy gems. ('Spring' 193–97)

To show that Thomson was 'a better colourist' than Milton, Gilpin quotes a version of this passage in which the sun 'spreads' over the plain (*Lakes* 1: 185), just as Wordsworth's setting sun spreads yellow light through long green fields. By 1798, the picturesque effects of sunset had been virtually canonized. Under the title of *Buttermere* in the Royal Academy exhibition of that year, J. M. W. Turner also quoted from Thomson's lines on the setting sun, including those on 'th' illumined mountain' and the 'yellow mist'.⁵ And in all versions of *An Evening Walk* (1793), Wordsworth's couplet on the setting sun—'Sunk to a curve the day-star lessens still, / Gives one bright glance, and sinks behind the hill' (lines 173–74)—derives 'From Thomson,' as Wordsworth says in a note to the couplet that also directs us to 'see Scott's Critical Essays' (*EW* 52). In those essays, John Scott not only quotes Thomson's description of a sunset ('Now half immers'd, and now a golden curve, / Gives one bright glance, then total disappears' ['Summer' 1628–29]); he also commends its pictorialism. 'The gradual descent and enlargement of the sun,' he writes, 'its immersion within the horizon, reduction to a curve and then total disappearance' are 'all fine natural and picturesque circumstances.'⁶ Collectively, then, the evidence suggests that with the aid of critics such as Scott and Gilpin and of poets such as Thomson, Wordsworth trained himself to read natural phenomena with a 'picturesque eye', to compose landscapes in words. Well before he declared in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* that he aimed to 'throw over [common incidents]

a certain colouring of imagination' (*PW* 2: 386), Gilpin had written that 'picturesque description' demands the vividness of 'high-colouring' (*Lakes* 1: xix).

Gilpin may also have led both Wordsworth and Coleridge to one of their most luminous analogies for the work of the imagination. After explaining how his very first view of Keswick at sunset 'was aided . . . by all the powers . . . of light and shade,' Gilpin concludes that 'a *common* sunset often gives a beautiful appearance even to an *ordinary* landscape' (*Lakes* 1: 184). Likewise, in recalling his conversations with Wordsworth in 1798 on 'the truth of nature' and 'the modifying colours of imagination,' Coleridge compared the two respectively to landscape and pictorial effects: 'The sudden charm, which accidents of light and shade, which moon-light or sun-set diffused over a known and familiar landscape, appeared to represent the practicability of combining both' (*BL* 2:5).

In thus aligning 'landscape' with 'nature,' Coleridge elides a gap that had long been bridged by the art of landscape gardening. While Joshua Reynolds firmly declared (in 1786) that 'Gardening, as far as Gardening is an Art . . . is a deviation from nature',⁷ English garden designers led by William Kent had long sought to accommodate their art to nature: to its irregularity, its fluid life, its twists and turns. In a sense, English landscapists sought to inscribe in the earth itself the Longinian principle that to achieve perfection, art must be disguised as nature.⁸ Paradoxically, Kent made gardens more 'natural' not just by rejecting the geometrical regularity of French landscapists but by taking cues from landscape painting: creating vistas, replacing straight lines with winding paths,

and sinking fences out of sight so as to open up the garden to its surroundings. ‘He leaped the fence,’ said Horace Walpole, ‘and saw that all nature was a garden.’⁹ More precisely, he turned nature into ‘natural’ pictures at estates such as Lord Cobham’s Stowe, where—during a visit in the 1740s—Gilpin conceived the picturesque method of looking at rural terrain as a sequence of changing vistas.¹⁰

In its genesis, then, the picturesque was doubly artificial: a way of looking at terrain as if it were a landscape garden designed to resemble a picture. Yet even while affirming—as noted above—that the ‘practiced eye’ of the traveller in quest of the picturesque must correct the ‘irregularities’ of nature, Gilpin also insisted that ‘the *rules of picturesque beauty* . . . are drawn from *nature* . . .’.¹¹ A like conviction animates what was surely the most conspicuous poem about landscape in the 1790s: Payne Knight’s *The Landscape* (1794), addressed to Uvedale Price, who—distinguishing the picturesque from both the Burkean beautiful (smooth, light, gracefully curved) and the Burkean sublime (vast, gloomy, terrifying)—applied it to small-scale scenery marked by roughness, intricacy, and irregularity, full of sharp contrasts and a variety of tints.¹² Embracing Price’s concept of the picturesque as a guide to garden design, Knight saw it as a way of liberating the garden—more precisely the rural estate—from the heavy hand of ‘improvers’ such as Humphrey Repton, successor to Capability Brown, whose designs seemed far too bald, smooth, and hence unnatural in the eyes of Price and Knight alike. Instead of Repton’s shaven lawns or the ‘imaginary plains’ of pastoral poetry, Knight salutes a

landscape ‘such as nature's common charms produce / For social man's delight and common use,’ and in verses meant to advertise the second edition of the poem, Edward Winnington celebrates its vision of a nature freed from the trammels of “the dull improver” and hails “liberty and nature” as “kindred powers”.¹³

In thus praising a vision of landscape—or rather of landscape gardening—that embodies both liberty and nature, Winnington seconds the political message of this ‘didactic’ poem, which attacks the arrogance of proprietorship by chastising anyone who would make his estate a showplace of ‘His vast possessions, and his wide domains’ (line 163). But the irony of this critique is that its author owned an estate of ten thousand acres, one of the largest in Herefordshire.¹⁴ The landscape of the poem, then, is virtually interchangeable with *Knight’s* landscape, and as Alan Liu observes, ‘the whole of *The Landscape* is an effort not so much to avoid property as to conceal it in ‘Nature’.¹⁵ Knight cannot conceal, however, the political history of landscape. For the landed gentry of eighteenth-century England, Tim Fulford writes, ‘the proper source of power and stability in the nation was the possession of land, and the organization of the prospect-view was an expression of their authority over the national landscape which they owned. . . . Through the prospect-view, the propertied classes were able to present their political dominance as confirmed by the natural scene.’¹⁶ Wordsworth himself never owned any of the houses he lived in, but in ‘View from the Top of Black Comb’ (1813, PW 2: 289-90), a south Cumberland peak that commands the grandest view in the whole country,

he reads the rivers, hills, and ‘earth-embracing sea’ itself as a collective display ‘of man’s inheritance / Of Britain’s calm felicity and power!’ (lines 31–34). Part of what belonged to Britain as a whole belonged to specific landowners like Knight. *An Evening Walk* subtly confirms the proprietary status of at least one of the sights Wordsworth describes: Lower Rydal falls, where ‘a small cascade / Illumes with sparkling foam the twilight shade’ (79–80) could be seen only from a window in the ‘Viewing House’ of Sir Michael Le Fleming, so the view is literally framed by his property (Liu 88–89). Lurking beneath the picturesque, then, and particularly inscribed in its emphasis on viewing a prospect from an elevated ‘station,’ was the concept of landscape as property: the property of those whose socio-economic station was likewise elevated.

Against this notion, one might argue, English poetry sought to democratize landscape. According to the OED, the word *scenery* was first used as a synonym for landscape—for ‘the aggregate of picturesque features in a landscape’ (OED)—in a passage of poetry that treats landscape as the property of all. Celebrating the ‘freeman’ in 1785, William Cowper declares:

He looks abroad into the varied field
 Of Nature, and, though poor perhaps compared
 With those whose mansions glitter in his sight,
 Calls the delightful scenery *all his own*.
 His are the mountains, and the valleys his,
 And the resplendent river's.¹⁷

Consciously or not, Wordsworth echoes these words at the end of the first edition of his *Guide to the Lakes*, published in 1810. Since the small farms of the district, he writes, may be soon be bought up and consolidated by ‘wealthy purchasers’ bent on mechanizing the ‘agricultural industry’ and building ‘new mansions,’ Wordsworth hopes that the ‘new proprietors’ will display ‘a better taste’ than those who have simply leveled ‘ancient cottages.’ And in this wish, he says, he will be joined by ‘persons of pure taste throughout the whole island,’ who testify by their ‘often repeated’ visits ‘that they deem the district a sort of national property, in which every man has a right and interest who has eye to perceive and a heart to enjoy’ (*PrW* 2: 224–25).

Yet the democratizing thrust of this statement is sharply qualified. For one thing, beyond its inhabitants, the Lake District offered its splendid pictures only to those who had the means and leisure to visit it even once, let alone repeatedly. In *Pride and Prejudice*, first published just three years after the *Guide* first appeared, Elizabeth Bennet sets ‘her heart on seeing the Lakes’ when her London-based aunt and uncle invite her to do so, but to her acute disappointment, the press of ‘business’ compels her uncle to curtail their trip.¹⁸ Members of the working classes could not even plan such a trip, for only in the 1840s did cheap railway day excursions make the lake district affordable for them.¹⁹ Furthermore, according to Wordsworth himself, the Lake District offers its pictures only to ‘persons of taste’ (*PrW* 2: 225), which means readers of guidebooks such as Gilpin’s and Wordsworth’s and also viewers of paintings. As Payne Knight observed in an essay published some years after *The Landscape*

but a few years before Wordsworth's *Guide*, picturesque beauties can 'only be felt by persons, who have correspondent ideas to associate; that is, by persons in a certain degree conversant with that art.'²⁰

Travellers seeking the picturesque could actually turn natural sights into works of art by means of a Claude-glass, eighteenth-century precursor to the photo-taking i-phone of our time. Bound up like a pocket book, this slightly convex blackened mirror of about four inches diameter allowed the traveler to see a natural sight reflected as if it were a somber-toned landscape painted by Claude Lorraine.²¹ Flattened in this mirror, images of natural sights struck Gilpin as resembling 'the scenes of a playhouse, retiring behind each other,' and when held to the window of a moving chaise, the Claude-glass offered 'a succession of high-coloured pictures . . . continually gliding before the eye.'²²

Theatricalizing as well as pictorializing the countryside, and presupposing readers who can afford to travel by chaise, Gilpin presents landscape as something that only a privileged spectator can fully appreciate.

The privileged position of the spectator is nowhere more evident than in Wordsworth's account of the view from Lancaster Castle in his Unpublished Tour of the Lakes. Though the castle and the mountains behind it 'present a grand picture'—a 'noble . . . landscape'—to anyone 'approaching from the South,' nothing can equal the panoramic view from the 'lofty station' of the castle tower. From here, writes Wordsworth, 'the Spectator looks upon the inferior towers, courts, roofs, walls, battlements, shipping, aqueduct, & Bridge—works of art sufficiently splendid for the situation which they occupy in the

centre of a magnificent prospect of sea & land' (*PrW* 2: 289–90). In somewhat like the way that 'Westminster Bridge' makes the 'Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples' of London part of the open fields around them and the river flowing past them, Wordsworth's description makes 'works of art'—in this case material artifacts, not imaginary pictures—part of a prospect that includes both 'sea & land.' But Wordsworth goes on to note something else that cannot so easily participate in this glorious prospect. 'In the several Courts immediately under the eye,' he says, 'the Debtors and various orders of Prisoners are seen pacing to & fro, amusing themselves or pursuing their occupations in the open air' (*PrW* 2: 290). Hence, even as the viewer beholds 'in the Waters & Mountains the uncontrollable motions & the inexhaustible powers of Nature . . . it is impossible not to be touched by a depressing sympathy with the unfortunate or guilty Captives under his eye' (*PrW* 2: 290–91).

Formally speaking, there is no place for sympathy in the framework of the picturesque. Frankly admitting that 'moral, and picturesque ideas do not always coincide,' Gilpin just as frankly declared that the traveler in search of the picturesque looks 'with disgust' at cultivated fields and eschews '*smooth* building[s]' in favor of ruinous rubble.²³ But Gilpin does not explain how we should view the ruin of human beings, for as Raymond Williams observes, 'the very idea of landscape implies separation and observation.'²⁴ When the speaker of *An Evening Walk* calmly beholds 'the spacious landscape change in form and hue,' he is the detached observer of a picture drawn with shifting lights and shadows. Nevertheless, in this very first of his descriptive poems, Wordsworth

ruptures the serenity of the picturesque by telling the story of a female vagrant—a soldier’s widow so weary she can scarcely walk—who is ‘deny’d to lay her head, / On cold blue nights, in hut or straw-built shed’ (lines 257–58), and who soon dies along with her children. With this story, as Liu notes, narrative and pathos alike rupture the picturesque surface of description, which nonetheless returns at the end to a trembling repose (Liu 123–27).

In *An Evening Walk* as in Wordsworth’s description of the view from Lancaster Castle, then, the pitiable figures marginally intrude on the viewer’s consciousness but do not radically disturb his or her experience of the view, which is denied to both the prisoners and the vagrant. (The vagrant may see and bless the cygnet swimming on the lake ‘by all a mother’s joys caressed’ [241], but otherwise can think of nothing but desperation and pain.) The conflict between aesthetic pleasure and the sight of pain—between lovely pictures and the pitiable human beings who distract us from them—is precisely what John Constable felt in response to Wordsworth’s *Excursion* (1814), which tells in its very first book the story of a woman who, like the vagrant, dies in destitution. Though Constable had met first Wordsworth during a sketching expedition to the Lake District in September 1806 (when he made a recently identified sketch of the poet that is now in the Royal Albert Memorial Museum in Exeter, Devon), he was introduced to *The Excursion* only in October 1823, during a visit to Coleorton, the country estate of Sir George Beaumont, the artist and art collector who had known and befriended Constable almost as long as he had known and befriended Wordsworth. After hearing Beaumont read long

sections of the poem, Constable gave it a decidedly mixed review. '[It] is beautifull,' he wrote, 'but has some sad melancholy stories, and as I think only serve to harrow you up without a purpose—it is bad taste—but some of the descriptions of Landscape are beautifull.'²⁵

In thus implying a wish to purge the poem of its human pain, leaving nothing but a gallery of verbal landscapes, Constable seems to remind us of his own practice. Though he includes workers in paintings such as *The Hay Wain* (1821) and *The Cornfield* (1826), they typically appear in the distance as little more than specks that tell us nothing of what they may be feeling. John Barrell has argued that Constable's landscapes idealize the rural world, stressing the poetically pastoral beauty of the landscape while suppressing reference to the labour required to produce it.²⁶ Likewise suppressed—or banished almost entirely—is any sight of misery or acute deprivation. But there is one notable exception: Constable's *Dedham Vale* of 1828, a dramatic reconstruction of his *Dedham Vale* of 1802.

Both paintings formally derive from Claude Lorraine's *Hagar and the Angel* (1646), a painting that Constable first saw and copied at the house of George Beaumont and that he practically worshipped.²⁷ In the earlier painting, which shows not even specks of figures, clumps of trees at left and right—Claudian wing screens—frame a vista with a winding stream leading to the seacoast town of Dedham with its church tower in the distance. The later painting heightens the intensity of these Claudian features by accentuating the triangularity of the foreground trees at right as well as by filling the sky with billowing cumuli, and

the lure of the vista is reinforced by a bolder chiaroscuro, which draws the eye over the pit of shadow in the foreground to the river, fields, town, and sea in the sunlit distance. Nevertheless, it is impossible to study this painting carefully without seeing what is just barely discernible in the shadowy foreground: a vagrant mother with her infant, cooking on an open fire beside a crude tent that mimics in its triangular shape the roof lines of the far more comfortable and substantial dwellings shown in the middle distance.

What are we to make of these figures? The composition of the picture literally tempts us to overlook them, for besides lurking in shadow they hover on the edge of determinable signification. According to John Barrell, Constable does not allow the impoverished mother and child to emerge from the shadows and solicit our pity (*Dark Side*, pp. 136–37). Instead, they are little more than a spot of red and a spot of white: proto-impressionistic bits of chromatic texture in a Claudian composition enhanced by chiaroscuro. Their shadowy lair is merely a foil to the glowing vista that we alone—the privileged connoisseurs of the picturesque—can see.

This is a plausible line of interpretation except for one thing. It does not explain why Constable *enables* us to recognize the destitution of the figures, and why—for all their shadowiness—they are the most conspicuous figures we see in the painting. They are also the only counterpart we can find to the Biblical figures that appear in the foreground of Claude's *Hagar and the Angel*. When we recall that Hagar was an outcast, a serving woman expelled from Abraham's household after she conceived his child, it becomes more than

possible to see the foreground figures in Constable's painting as contemporary outcasts, figures that society has no place for but that the sensitive, observant artist—like the sensitive poet—cannot fail to notice and represent. They cannot simply be reduced to bits of picturesque texture.

In the 1828 *Dedham Vale*, then, Constable re-creates what was once called 'history painting'—the painting of a Biblical or mythological subject. Reconceiving the traditional relation between landscape and the figures who populate it, he makes Claude's Biblical outcasts give way to the human debris of contemporary history: to barely personified spots of life, nameless figures who play no visible part on the stage of public events but quietly insist on taking their place in the landscape of contemporary human experience.

Consider, then, what Wordsworth does with vagrants in the landscape of 'Tintern Abbey'. By the summer of 1798, when he composed the poem, he had not only described a female vagrant in *An Evening Walk*; he had written 'The Female Vagrant,' which would shortly appear in *Lyrical Ballads*, and also the first version of the story of another destitute woman—Margaret—that Constable would long after hear from Beaumont. The ruins of Tintern Abbey housed many vagrants. In 1770, when Gilpin made the observations on which he based his *River Wye* (1782), it was crawling with beggars living in 'little huts, raised among the ruins of the monastery.' He was not so much touched as revolted by their wretchedness, but ironically enough, he was disappointed by the tidiness of the abbey grounds. 'More *picturesque* it would certainly have been,' he wrote, 'if the area, unadorned, had been left with all its rough fragments of ruin.'²⁸

Wordsworth's poem offers us neither ruined stone nor ruined figures, but a subtle sign of the latter takes its place in the picturesque tranquillity of the landscape:

wreaths of smoke

Sent up, in silence, from among the trees!

With some uncertain notice, as might seem

Of vagrant dwellers in the houseless woods,

Or of some Hermit's cave, where by his fire

The Hermit sits alone. (*PW* 2: 260–61; lines 17–22)

This passage is one of many in the poem that push beyond the framework of the picturesque, beyond what Scott Hess calls 'the perceptual structures of framed landscape vision'.²⁹ Unlike Constable's vagrant mother, neither the vagrants nor the hermit can be seen at all; their presence can only be guessed—uncertainly inferred—from the wreaths of smoke. Otherwise they are excluded, along with the abbey itself, which Gilpin called 'a splendid ruin' (*Wye*, p. 48), and which Turner painted in watercolor at least seven times in the 1790s; his *Interior of Tintern Abbey* (1794) fully exploits the picturesque appeal of broken walls, mottled stone, Gothic arches wreathed in foliage, and fragments of ruin (that evidently fell after Gilpin's visit, or perhaps that Turner simply invented).³⁰ Yet it is precisely the picturesque appeal of the abbey that Wordsworth deliberately excludes from a poem that is—ironically enough—chiefly known to us by a short title denoting the abbey. As its full title tells us, he contemplates not the abbey but the landscape to be found a few miles 'above' it—upriver from it—and seen for a second time after a five-year separation from it.

In this second viewing or second sight of a landscape profoundly personalized over years of recollection, Wordsworth strikingly transforms the conventions of the picturesque. In the picturesque response to a natural scene, the observer sees it in the light of a remembered picture; as Payne Knight says, he associates it with a specific painting or with features characteristic of landscape paintings in general. In 'Tintern Abbey,' however, the remembered picture that informs the speaker's response to the scene is not a painting but a mental landscape, 'a picture of the mind' (line 61)—in two senses. It is first of all the mind's possession, a picture of what the speaker's eyes actually saw on his first visit, a picture painted not on any canvas but only in the poet's memory, where he alone can see, study, and interpret it. (The remembered field of dancing daffodils that later inspired 'I Wandered Lonely'—significantly a *moving* picture in every sense—is another such possession of the mind.) Second, as a picture *of* the mind, it is also a picture *representing* the mind, a sign of remembered feelings that he 'cannot paint' (line 75) but simply evoke by means of nature, which emerges here as something quite different from landscape. Some years before Wordsworth wrote his poem, an agriculturalist named William Marshall had flatly declared, 'Nature scarcely knows the thing mankind call a *landscape*.'³¹ While Marshall meant that the landscape painter almost never finds a natural sight 'perfected to his hands' with no need of alteration, the nature recalled in this poem—the nature that was 'all in all' to the speaker in his adolescence (line 75)—cannot be painted at all. Though the 'colours and . . . forms' of its material components—such as the sounding cataract, the mountain, and the gloomy wood—are said to have no need of anything 'unborrowed from the eye' (line 83), the sound of the cataract is of course an auditory memory that takes its place with the very first sensation

recorded in the poem: the ‘soft inland murmur’ of the river heard by the speaker in time present (lines 2–4).

Sound played a key part in liberating Wordsworth from what he called the ‘tyranny’ of the eye (*Prelude* 1805, 11: 179). Writing elsewhere of his adolescence, he remembers having felt on starlit nights

what’er there is of power in sound

To breathe an elevated mood, by form

Or image unprofaned. (*Prelude* 1805, 2. 324–26)

Besides transforming the conventions of the picturesque by shifting his focus from visible landscape to the power of sound, ‘Tintern Abbey’ transforms the relation between landscape and history. With a title that places the poem a few miles above the abbey, Wordsworth prompts us to see that the poem he might have written on the political and ecclesiastical history of a magnificent Cistercian ruin has been daringly displaced by a poem on this history of his relation to the river Wye, which is in turn made to signify the history of his relation to nature. But the poem never turns its back on ruin and never blinds itself to the prospect of dissolution and loss, however much it may avert its eyes from the unlovely forms accumulating along the Wye. When Wordsworth assures Dorothy that they can withstand the prospect of psychic ruin, that nothing can “disturb / [Their] cheerful faith that all which we behold / Is full of

blessings” (lines 132-34), he implies the very opposite—by subtly evoking the ruined monument to a faith that was violently disturbed centuries ago, as well as of European monasteries invaded and despoiled just a few years before. In thus personalizing the history of ruin rather than simply describing a landscape picturesquely dominated by a celebrated ruin, Wordsworth reconstructs the poetry of landscape.³²

‘Tintern Abbey’ thus confirms what Wordsworth wrote just a few years later about his susceptibility to the picturesque: that the ‘soul of nature’ soon vanquished this ‘strong infection of the age,’ this habit of judging natural terrain ‘by rules of mimic art transferred / To things above all art’, and comparing ‘scene with scene’ (*Prelude* 1805, 11: 146–59).

But he never simply abandoned ‘mimic art’ and its conventions for the unmediated experience of ‘nature’. His *Guide through the Lakes*, first published anonymously as a prose commentary on Joseph Wilkinson’s *Select Views in Cumberland, Westmoreland, and Lancashire* (1810) and then repeatedly under Wordsworth’s name, often tells the reader where to stand for the finest views of his favorite sights—above all of Grasmere—and when to see them in (literally) the best light. He also wrote twelve ekphrastic poems, including three sonnets suggested by prints in William Westall’s *Views of the Caves Near Ingleton in Yorkshire* (1818) and the well-known ‘Elegiac Stanzas Suggested by a Picture of Peele Castle, in a Storm, Painted by Sir George Beaumont’ (1806). Beaumont’s painting is judged against a mental picture of the castle remembered from a summer month in which the poet saw it every day beneath

a 'pure', perfectly tranquil sky, with its 'Image'—its reflected form—'sleeping on a glassy sea' (*PW* 4: 258, line 4). Wordsworth was fascinated with reflections in water, which—like a natural Claude glass—turned three dimensional surroundings into pictures like the one seen by the boy of Winander in *The Prelude*: when his 'mimic hootings to the silent owls' across the lake sometimes failed to make them respond,

the visible scene

Would enter unawares into his mind

With all its solemn imagery, its rocks,

Its woods, and that uncertain heaven, received

Into the bosom of the steady lake. (*Prelude* 1805, 5: 409–13)

Passages like this imply that like the Claude-glass, or like Turner's many paintings of Venice reflected in the Grand Canal, reflections in water idealize what they reflect, reversing the Platonic doctrine—itsself reflected by Milton—that reflections are always inferior to their originals.³³ But in Wordsworth's poetry, landscape pictures made by reflections in water can sometimes prove just as illusory as Plato thought. Though the reflection of Peele Castle seems to idealize the original, turning it into something that 'trembled, but never passed away' (line 8), and though this naturally generated picture once prompted the poet to imagine a painting that would transfigure both the castle and its reflection, would 'add the gleam, / The light that never was, on sea or land, /

The consecration, and the Poet's dream' (lines 14–16), such a picture utterly fails to represent the sea that the poet now knows from the death of his brother John, who had drowned in a shipwreck the year before Wordsworth first saw Beaumont's painting. Significantly, however, Wordsworth does not weigh the 'superficial' value of art—of all painted landscapes or seascapes—against the inexorable power of nature. Though he elsewhere chastises himself for comparing one scene with another, here he judges two pictures—one beautiful, one sublime—and finds the latter far more true to what he now knows of the sea, of mortality, of human experience. In Wordsworth's reading of Beaumont's painting, then, the 'sublime' castle becomes a symbol of perseverance, braving 'the lightning, the fierce wind, and trampling waves' (line 52).

But if Wordsworth's critique of pictorial repose and the would-be transfigurative effect of picture-like mirroring is itself inspired by a painting, nothing exemplifies his assault on the conventions of picturesque description quite so dramatically as his account of what he saw one evening as a boy from the seat of a rowboat. In the First Part of the two-part *Prelude* of 1799, Wordsworth recalls a moonlit night on which—by 'an act of stealth' (line 90)—he took a shepherd's skiff and rowed it out into what has been identified as Ullswater (*Prelude*, p. 544). While rowing away from the shore and thus laying a picturesque track of small, sparkling circles in the water, he looks up beyond the shore. In what sounds like an act of explicitly picturesque stationing, he 'fixe[s] a steady view' on the summit of a 'rocky steep' that forms 'the bound of the horizon' (lines 96–101)—a line of first importance in any picture of landscape.

But unlike connoisseurs of the picturesque—such as the speaker of Wordsworth’s own *Evening Walk*—the boy is no detached observer of the scene. Having stolen the boat, he is gripped by a sense of guilt—of ‘troubled pleasure’ (line 91)—that invades everything he sees and hears. Also, even though his view is called ‘steady’, his viewpoint steadily changes with every pull of the oars until he begins to see what is behind the ridge, ‘till then / The bound of the horizon’ (lines 107–08). Thus redrawn by repetition, this line is frighteningly ruptured when

a huge cliff,

As if with voluntary power instinct,

Upreared its head. I struck, and struck again,

And growing still in stature, the huge cliff

Rose up between me and the stars, and still,

With measured motion, like a living thing

Strode after me. (lines 108–114)

In steadily moving his viewpoint away from the shore, the boy just as steadily brings more and more of the mountain into his field of vision. But since the guilt-haunted boy does not know what makes the peak seem to rise up over him, he fearfully imagines it as a living pursuer, and ‘with trembling hands’ (line 114) rows back to shore. Instead of commanding a view, then, he is *commanded* by what he sees. As the mature poet perceives in retrospect, the

‘spirits’ (line 69) of nature led him to see that its power far surpasses anything that can be commanded by a viewer, delineated by a horizon, or caught within a frame.

Paradoxically, however, its power also depends on the poet himself. The spirits of nature are Wordsworth’s version of the classical *genii loci* with whom, as Blake declared, ‘the ancient Poets animated all sensible objects.’³⁴ As Wordsworth reveals here, the peak is at once made to rise through the physical exertion of the rowing boy and voluntarized—charged ‘with voluntary power’—by the power of his imagination, which he recognizes only in retrospect. Wordsworth’s ‘nature’ has lately been called ‘a special aesthetic and spiritual sphere, set apart from the ordinary social and commercial world, to be approached with the same reverent contemplation as a cathedral, an artwork, or a canonical work of literature’ (Hess 70). But Wordsworth’s nature is more than an artwork. In his re-creation of the natural world, the picture frame of traditional landscape is displaced by a natural artist: a nature he construes as his collaborator in a creative project executed ‘with blended might’ (Prospectus line 70, *PW* 5.5).

Wordsworth’s revolution against the tyranny of the eye was anything but simple. Though he claims to have overthrown in his young manhood the conventions of picturesque viewing, judging, and describing, and though he writes that he ‘shook the habit off/ Entirely and forever’ to stand ‘In nature’s

presence, as I stand now, / A sensitive, and a *creative* soul' (*Prelude* 1805, 11: 253–56), he never wholly abandoned the vocabulary of picturesque description. But as the boat-stealing passage illustrates, he made that vocabulary serve his vision of a nature whose powers could not be framed by the conventions of landscape painting or commanded by the political imperatives of the picturesque. Furthermore, though he sometimes represents the natural world from a viewpoint that is culturally privileged, politically empowered, physically elevated, or all three, poems such as 'Tintern Abbey' move well beyond the boundaries of aesthetic satisfaction to recognize the human suffering they often exclude, and to link that suffering with the life of the speaker. By thus re-creating in his poetry both the power of nature and the music of humanity, Wordsworth fundamentally reconstructs the conventions of landscape.

¹ *The Monthly Review*, N.S. XXVIII (1799), 394; *Essay upon Prints*, 2nd ed. (London, 1768), p. x.

² William Gilpin, *Observations, . . . on . . . the Mountains and Lakes of Cumberland, and Westmorland*. 2 vols. (London, 1786) 2: 44.

³ *Observations on the River Wye*. 2nd ed. (London, 1789), 1–2.

⁴ 'My First Acquaintance with the Poets' (1823), *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, ed. M.H. Abrams, Stephen Greenblatt et al., 2 vols., 7th ed. (New York: Norton, 2000) 2: 523.

⁵ Martin Butlin and Evelyn Joll, *The Paintings of J. M. W. Turner*, rev. ed. (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1984) Text #7.

⁶ *Critical Essays on Some of the Poems of Several English Poets* (London, 1785), 348.

⁷ *Discourses on Art*, ed. Robert R. Wark, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale, 1975), 240.

⁸ See Edward Malins, *English Landscaping and Literature, 1660-1840* (New York: Oxford UP, 1966), viii.

⁹ Quoted in J. R. Watson, *Picturesque Landscape and English Romantic Poetry* (London: Hutchinson, 1970), 16.

¹⁰ Andrew Wilton, *Turner and the Sublime* (London: British Museum, 1980) 31; Carl Paul Barbier, *William Gilpin: His Drawings, Teaching, and Theory of the Picturesque* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1963), 21–23.

¹¹ *Observations . . . on . . . the Mountains and Lakes of Cumberland, and Westmoreland*. 2 vols., 3rd ed. (London, 1808) 1: xxi.

¹² Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. James T. Boulton (1958; repr. Notre Dame, Ind.: U of Notre Dame P, 1968) 124; Uvedale Price, *An Essay on the Picturesque* (1794; repr. in *Uvedale Price on the Picturesque*, ed. Sir Thomas Dick Lauder (London, 1842), 82, 98–99.

¹³ William Payne Knight, *The Landscape, A Didactic Poem. In Three Books. Addressed To Uvedale Price, Esq.* 2nd ed. (London: G. Nicol, 1795), lines 380, 383–84; Advertisement p. xiv.

¹⁴ Frank J. Messman, *Richard Payne Knight: The Twilight of Virtuosity*. Studies in English Literature, vol. 89 (The Hague, 1974), 15.

¹⁵ Alan Liu, *Wordsworth: The Sense of History* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1989), 91.

¹⁶ Tim Fulford, *Landscape, Liberty, and Authority: Poetry, Criticism and Politics from Thomson to Wordsworth* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996), 2–3.

¹⁷ *The Task* (Book 5, lines 741–46) in *The Poems of William Cowper*, ed. John D. Baird and Charles Ryskamp, 3 vols. (New York : Oxford UP, 1979–1995), emphasis mine.

¹⁸ *Pride and Prejudice*, ed. Donald Gray, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 1993), 154.

¹⁹ Elizabeth Helsinger, ‘Turner and the Representation of England,’ in W. J. T. Mitchell, ed. *Landscape and Power* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1994), 107.

²⁰ Richard Payne Knight, *An Analytical Inquiry into the Principles of Taste*, 4th ed. (London, 1805–08), p. 154.

²¹ Deborah Jean Warner, ‘The Landscape Mirror and Glass,’ *Antiques* 105 (January 1974), pp. 158–59.

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- ²² *Remarks on Forest Scenery*, 2 vols. (London, 1791) 2: 235, 233–34.
- ²³ *Lakes* 2: 44; *Three Essays: On Picturesque Beauty; On Picturesque Travel; and On Sketching Landscape: To Which is Added a Poem, On Landscape Painting*. 2nd ed. (London, 1794) 7–8.
- ²⁴ Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (Frogmore: Paladin, 1975), 149.
- ²⁵ *John Constable's Correspondence*, ed. R.S. Beckett, 6 vols. (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1962–68) 2: 292.
- ²⁶ John Barrell, *The Dark Side of the Landscape: The Rural Poor in English Painting, 1730–1840* (London, Cambridge UP, 1972) 131–64
- ²⁷ See James Heffernan, *Cultivating Picturacy: Visual Art and Verbal Interventions* (Waco, TX: Baylor UP, 2006) 318 n.40.
- ²⁸ Gilpin, *Observations on the River Wye* [1782], 5th ed. (London, 1800) 51–52.
- ²⁹ Scot Hess, *William Wordsworth and the Ecology of Authorship: The Roots of Environmentalism in Nineteenth-Century Culture* (Charlottesville, VA : University of Virginia, 2012), 22
- ³⁰ This picture is reproduced on the cover of Robert Woof and Stephen Hebron, *Toward Tintern Abbey: A Bicentenary Celebration of 'Lyrical Ballads'* with an introductory essay by Pamela Woof (Grasmere: The Wordsworth Trust, 1998).
- ³¹ *Planting and Rural Ornament*, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (London, 1796), qtd. Malcolm Andrews, *The Search for the Picturesque: Landscape, Aesthetics and Tourism in Britain, 1760–1800* (Aldershot, England: Scholar's Press, 1989), 34.
- ³² See James Heffernan, "Wordsworth's 'Leveling' Muse in 1798," *1798: The Year of the Lyrical Ballads*, ed. Richard Cronin (London: Macmillan 1998) 241–45.
- ³³ See Stephen J. Spector, 'Wordsworth's Mirror Imagery and the Picturesque Tradition' *ELH* 44.1 (Spring 1977) pp. 85–107, and James Heffernan, 'The Revaluation of Reflections' in *The Re-Creation of Landscape* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1985) pp. 201–224.
- ³⁴ *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Plate 11, in *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman with Commentary by Harold Bloom (New York: Doubleday, 1965) 37.