

Towards a Reading of Wordsworth's "Now ye meet in the cave"

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Article abstract

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Romanticism on the Net

Towards a Reading of Wordsworth's "Now ye meet in the cave"

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Abstract

Wordsworth's very early "Now ye meet in the cave" (dating from 1786 or a little later) is a strange fragment. It emanates from a desperate, unidentified speaker and bears on the burial of a mysterious female whose death is yet uncertain. It has been largely passed over by critics, with the exception of Duncan Wu—who suggested the poem might be about Wordsworth's mother. This article follows this intuition, and explores common features of language and theme with a range of works of Wordsworth's early youth. The conclusion is that "Now ye meet in the cave" is a significant document, and expresses fundamental, yet inevitably covert, facets of Wordsworth's sensibility. In broadening this case, the article relates a final close reading of the poem to two important, inter-related contexts. The first is Stanley Cavell's discussion of Romantic scepticism as a metaphysical fantasy involving the refusal of finitude, and a suspended sense of the world's existence. The second references recent research in child psychology that demonstrates the automatic unconscious fantasy of a young orphaned child who affectively bargains his knowledge of his parent's death for the belief that she still somehow is incorporated, within himself, and within nature.

Biographical Note

John Hughes teaches at the University of Gloucestershire, and has published widely on Romantic and nineteenth-century literature, and literary theory. He has written five books: *Lines of Flight* (Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), *"Ecstatic Sound": Music and Individuality in the Work of Thomas Hardy* (Ashgate, 2001), *"Affective Worlds": Writing, Feeling, and Nineteenth-Century Literature* (Sussex Academic Press, 2011), *Invisible Now: Bob Dylan in the 1960s* (Ashgate, 2013) and *"The Expression of Things": Themes in Thomas Hardy's Fiction and Poetry* (Sussex Academic Press, 2017). Related work on Wordsworth has appeared in *"Affective Worlds"*, *Romanticism*, *Studies in Romanticism*, and *The Explicator*.

1. Aside from some valuable remarks by Carol Landon and Jared Curtis, the editors of the Cornell volume *Early Poems and Fragments 1785-1797*, Duncan Wu appears to be the single critic who has written about “Now ye meet in the cave”, a mysterious, somewhat haunting and deranged fragment by the adolescent poet. Landon and Curtis suggest that the “lines seem to be indebted to Ossian in their style and setting” (670). This is presumably because of their overwrought epic grandiloquence, and their reference to cave burial. The comparison would be with Book VI of *The Poems of Ossian* when Ossian responds to the dying plea of the fallen hero, Fillan: “‘Ossian, I begin to fail. Lay me in that hollow rock’ [...] I laid him in the hollow rock, at the roar of the nightly stream” (MacPherson 339-40).
2. Although Wordsworth’s fragment and its context are shrouded in many kinds of uncertainty, its central scenario is fairly clear. Addressing “husband sons and all”, the speaker implores them to make a “grave” for a mysterious woman who “dies”. But then, as if he alone is privy to her wishes, he abruptly calls on them to “bear” her instead “into the salt sea”. There, he continues fervently, she can find peace, and lie near to the “coffins of the rock” where “you do lie”:

Now ye meet in the cave
husband sons and all
if ye've hands oh make a grave
for she dies she dies she dies
She wishes not for a grave
bear into the salt sea, for
Where you lie there she will lie
Oh bear her into the salt sea
If ye wish her peace [ʔoh] bear
Bear her to the salt sea bear
[] by
The very spot where you do lie
With your [ʔwives] by day
In the coffins of the rock
What has she [to] do with the churchyard (670)

The references to sea burial lead Landon and Curtis to invoke the “mythology of mermen and mermaids” (670), whereby their marine souls would be endangered by contact with earthly

beings. As with the Ossian association, this mythological connection does not explain the lines, though it can make it easier to dismiss them as a hasty, abandoned sketch of a merely adolescent, ersatz kind. And it would be foolish to deny that the poem has this aspect, with its overlapping phrases appearing like a series of false, rough starts.

3. The editors date the piece from 1787 or 1788, though concede it could have been written up to a year earlier. On the basis of its place in the notebook Wu dates it as having been written in 1786, and comments that it is a “barely choate” text. Notwithstanding, he suggests also that it is one worthy of serious consideration in that

There may even be cause for thinking that this poem is about Wordsworth’s reaction to his mother’s death; if so, it is the one place where he approaches that subject (37-39).

If this is true, then certainly it would be a significant document, and indeed everything that follows here can be seen as an attempt to pursue and expand on Wu’s hint, bearing in mind also his view that loss was the mainspring of Wordsworth’s art, and that “Grief was the making of Wordsworth” (1).¹

4. But to begin with, what can one make of the words themselves? Confounding though they seem, their intonations transmit a palpable desperation. The speaker appears in an over-riding and mysterious way to be sole witness to the wishes of the dead or dying woman, yet he also appears utterly powerless to pass them on. His calls fall away unanswered, as if unheard by those he addresses, leading only to a tormented and frantic redoubling.² In a parallel way too, his words fail to resolve into meaning for the reader. They defy coherence and logic. In fact, the more one reflects on them, the more questions and paradoxes proliferate: is the woman dead or dying? Why is she to be buried in the cave, or the sea, and not a churchyard? And how can she still make her wishes known? And what is the nature of their desperate urgency? And who are the “husband sons and all”? And are they even ghosts themselves, these mysterious nocturnal figures who lie “by day... [i]n the coffins of the rock”? In this respect, the speaker’s words disintegrate as we read. They themselves come to resemble fragments, as words and phrases become dislocated from viable contexts and meaning.

5. So, one can certainly understand why critics would be tempted to pass over lines that are so abandoned, fractured, and irreducibly puzzling. One tends to respond to the text with a shake of the head, because it is so confounding, voicing a desperate plea and private predicament that one is unable to comprehend. And it can appear all the more an aberration given that the youthful Wordsworth was so capable of writing composed, recognizably conventional, generic verse at this time. By contrast, “Now ye meet in the cave” positively invites dismissal as a modish, if odd, experiment, or as a merely lurid and off-beam imagining.
6. And yet, equally clearly, one can find oneself intrigued by the unbridled intensity of this imploring voice, the opacity and mystery of the lines, and their haunted, haunting scenario of family grief. In what follows, I argue that the poem merits serious consideration because these disintegrative features reveal important underlying aspects of Wordsworth’s youthful imagination. The next two sections frame the final reading of the poem by tracing links between it and common imaginative, linguistic and subjective patterns in Wordsworth’s very earliest work. This contextual and inter-textual material allows for development of the controlling perception that “Now ye meet in the cave” expresses a sensibility that bears within itself an unresolved grief that divides the speaker from his world, and leaves him sealed in an imagined intimacy with a lost woman. The essay will close with suggestions of how such a reading can illuminate the inter-related biographical, affective, and philosophical dimensions of Wordsworth’s work.

I.

7. James Averill wrote that Wordsworth’s juvenilia, experimenting with classical and contemporary models and translations, manifest “a poet in search of an effective way to provoke tragic emotions” (38). The following sections trace the specific forms this recurrently took, in poems where those affected by loss, as in “Now ye meet in the cave”, are represented not simply as grieving, but as retaining on another level an identification with the dead that suspends the acknowledgment of their mortality. That is to say, Wordsworth’s departed are described as if they retained some mysterious, reduced form of after-life, a residual form of connectedness to life and nature. And reciprocally, as in “Now ye meet in the cave”, the consciousness of the survivor appears still bound up with the dead, as if the departed provided it with an obscure, elided

condition, an ever-present out-of-field. A further effect of this is that his vitality appears stilled, or even reduced or challenged, as if by virtue of the bond with the deceased, and the imaginative sense of their strange continuance.

8. In “The Death of a Starling”, for instance (written between August 1786 and October 1787), the poet supplements his translation of Catullus’s lament for a woman’s dead bird with his own conceit that the bird is happier than her because it has found “the mighty parent’s care” (373). Wordsworth’s tenderly quiescent language abets and enters into the poem’s fashioning of death as neither extinction nor the Christian after-life, but some strangely reposeful state of life-in-death, where the bird finds “peace in silence sleeping/ In some still world unknown remote” (373). Modest as the example is, it shows how Wordsworth, like Orpheus, is drawn away from life to refuse the absolute nature of death and to conceive it as another dimension. In this Wordsworth himself resembles another bird, in a contemporaneous fragment (presumably also inspired by Catallus), entitled “On the death of an unfortunate Lady”. This bird, freed by “some infant from its prison gloom”, escapes its cage, convinced that it can move beyond the impervious “treacherous glass” to a world beyond. However, with fatal, if predictable, irony it kills itself in the process, leaving the child to mourn:

Ah! have you seen a bird of sweetest tone
Freed by some infant from its prison gloom
Quick to the treacherous glass the mourner flies –
Go make its little grave – it falls – it dies (391)

This strange, liminal metaphysics of the early verse tends to erase the differences between the living and the dead, and creates a chiasmic commerce between them. “Ballad” was completed in March 1787, just prior to the writing of *The Vale of Esthwaite*, and was one of many poems that turn on sorrow and death.³ It embellishes the tale of Mary Rigge of Colthouse who died of love, aged 21, in 1860. After her lover’s desertion, nature wears a new aspect, in the portentous gloom cast by the clouds over Esthwaite:

Oft has she seen sweet Esthwaite’s lake
Reflect the morning sheen
When lo! the sullen clouds arise
And dim the smiling scene (386).

Wordsworth's language becomes here a register for visionary intimations that obscure the "smiling" natural scene. The natural mirroring of water and sky is obscured through "sullen" and dimming influences that convert the scene into a threshold for the world of death that now draws Mary towards itself. So she becomes a midnight roamer of silent graves, her demise ever more imminent, until in an uncanny prefiguration we hear of how her deathly counterpart has ominously infiltrated this reality from the world beyond: "oft her waft was seen / With wan light standing at a door / Or shooting o'er the green" (388).

9. In "The Dog – An Idyllium", from early 1788, the transfers between life and death have a more positive aspect. Here the demise of the "stiff and chill" dog is incrementally transformed into a liminal state of mere stillness, and a recognisably Wordsworthian state of mysterious quietude and participation with nature:

He saw not bark'd not he was still

As the soft moonbeam sleeping on the hill (398)

Again, language conveys this transmutation. The hanging participle "sleeping" hovers between the dog and the moonlight, suggesting a latent power of animation.⁴ As so often in Wordsworth, grammatical and lexical uncertainty has its own power of transference. In this case, it suggests a common transcendent plane of being in which dog, moonbeam and hill all participate (and so anticipates also the vitalized, inspirited nature at the end of *An Evening Walk*). "Still" is another key and characteristic word here. Placed at the line ending, it offers both transition and finality, resonating with associations of persistence, quietness, and inaction that displace its literal association with inertness and death. By such means again, visionary suggestions of a transcendent, indwelling power of nature enter the scene. Materiality and death become continuous with mere states of unconsciousness, with a "sleeping" "still" that binds together all elements, into a sublimed collectivity. Significantly too, at the end of the poem the imagination rises up with its own resurrective power, waking to itself as a faculty that can restoratively make the dead rise again in visions from "the calm ocean of my mind", in "some new created Image". Thus, the poet recovers within himself the time when "my glad hand sprung to thee/ - We were the happiest pair on earth" (399).

10. The fragmented 1788 translations of the Orpheus and Eurydice story are particularly important in figuring such passages between the worlds of the living and the dead. Orpheus's grief is

initially associated with his mournful singing and his stringed “hollow shell”, and it is his inability to accept or overcome Eurydice’s death that drives him to the underworld.⁵ However, the poem’s action is not only motivated by this continuing tie with the dead, but turns on it narratively, even literally. As Orpheus leaves Eurydice behind, he feels behind him, by some clairvoyance, her unseen “lingering looks”. He is compelled to look back once more. And with this fatal motion, Eurydice three times repeats her “horrid long” and “dreary piercing shriek”:

Returning [?he] []
Felt his dear wife the sweet approach of Light
Following behind [...]
When [] a sudden madness stole
His swimming senses from the lover’s soul [...]
He paus’d, and treading on the edge of day
Mindless, his fainting soul dissolved away
He turn’d and gaz’[d]
From Hell’s still waters thrice was heard to break
A horrid long a dreary piercing shriek – (638-40)

Before turning, “[m]indless, his fainting soul dissolved away”. At this climactic moment, it is as if his self-evacuation were the reciprocal condition of her quasi-apostrophic, interruptive, access into the world of the living. The lineation and the words suggest this chiasmic logic once more, whereby Eurydice now becomes a second expressive centre in the poem, while Orpheus’ selfhood becomes suspended or emptied, as if to accommodate her incursive influence. In this respect, the scene is powerfully suggestive, though negatively here, of what can be called the elliptical nature of subjectivity in Wordsworth. That is to say, of its sense of commerce and commutability, as the self finds itself outside itself, dependent upon a corresponding nature or person.

11. In this case though, as in these (and other) very early poems, including “Now ye meet in the cave”, the association with a dead beloved may reflect the central figure, but it also thereby dramatizes and figures his dejected, bereft interiority. Orpheus inhabits a kind of cave-life, bound still to the departed woman and powerless to move on. Interestingly Wu reads the close of the poem as expressing further, partially redemptive, transfers between the worlds of the living and the dead, through a sympathetic connection in grief, and then death, that passes between Orpheus and a maternal nature:

[...] the Lake District landscape performs the protective function of guardian, friend and earth mother. Orpheus' death is no obstacle to this; in death he becomes part of a natural process, gravitating closer to the ideal relationship with the earth mother which in Wordsworth's later poems will be enjoyed by Lucy and the Winander boy (33).

Clearly though, there is a striking contrast between the Orpheus fragment and so many well-known later works where the eventual sense of correspondence is of a more positive kind. As has been suggested, it is a signature effect, after all, of Wordsworth's poetry that his speaker will be surprised by the animating influence of a natural scene, another person, or interlocutor. He will find himself transported beyond himself, while his tones and mood become uplifted and informed by the mind's sympathetic interfusion with the world outside. In fact, one can observe from this early period one of the first instances of this paradigmatic pattern of recreation, Wordsworth's "Sonnet, on seeing Miss Helen Maria Williams weep at a Tale of Distress". This was his first published poem, coming out in March 1787, though written "in the second half of 1786 or at the beginning of 1787" according to Landon and Curtis (394). It prefigures so many later poems in so far as it represents a seemingly accidental encounter that reveals to the mind its necessary, inmost components of physical, affective, spiritual and poetic experience.

She wept. – Life's purple tide began to flow
In languid streams through each thrilling vein;
Dim were my swimming eyes – my pulse beat slow
And my full heart was swell'd to dear delicious pain.

Life left my loaded heart, and closing eye;
A sigh recall'd the wanderer to my breast;
Dear was the pause of life, and dear the sigh
That call'd the wanderer home, and home to rest.

That tear proclaims – in thee each virtue dwells
And bright will shine in misery's midnight hour;
As the soft star of dewy evening tells
What radiant fires were drown'd by day's malignant pow'r,
That only wait the darkness of the night
To chear the wand'ring wretch with hospitable light (396).

The poem turns on a moment and movement of sympathy, as the poet weeps at the woman's weeping. This involuntary reciprocity initially discomposes him, and brings about a moment of self-absence. However, this then gives way to the influx of an intensified, reinvigorated sense of vitality that overflows, like a tidal river, the rocky separations and determinations of consciousness ("Life's purple tide began to flow"). The formal breaks, and phased, rhythmical influxes of the writing ("my pulse beat slow ... swell'd to dear delicious pain") expressively convey this interruptive, then expansive, recreational process. The rhythm enacts the pulse and swell of a natural condition of feeling that is now exhilaratingly felt along the bloodstream, so that the returning sensations appear indices of an enhanced sense of identity. Nevertheless, it is worth emphasizing too that this thrilling mysteriously restorative current of life is itself paradoxical. It is inside the self - as a rediscovered, indwelling source of vitality. At the same time, it is puzzlingly extrinsic, in so far as it has been absent, and is now dependent on the influence of another person for its return to the poet.

12. While the poem contrasts with the previous poems though, it also possesses crucial similarities. Like them, the sonnet turns on transitional moments of indetermination. In the second stanza, a paradoxical opacity overtakes the lines as they crucially unfold the speaker's transfigured experience of self:

Life left my loaded heart, and closing eye;
A sigh recall'd the wanderer to my breast;
Dear was the pause of life, and dear the sigh
That call'd the wanderer home, and home to rest.

Presumably the reiterated word "wanderer" refers to "Life", though it could also refer to heart? However, it is an obscure, even confounding, designation, as is the speaker's identification with a quasi-maternal folding of this alienated errant to his breast, as if he were describing a homecoming of the self to itself. Nonetheless, at this point one can relatively simply make a direct comparison with "Now ye meet in the cave". The ideas of maternity, emotion, and bringing to rest recur here, along with the suggestion of a self that is exiled from itself, and crucially dependent on its affective bond with a woman.

13. However, the contrast with "Now ye meet in the cave" is equally instructive, since this woman is identified clearly by name and situation, and identified too with the speaker's return to himself,

an experience that leads him further to ruminate on the saving qualities expressed through her pitying tear that shines forth like a star... In this poem, one can say, the radiant virtues of Helen Maria Williams (whom Wordsworth was yet to meet) partake of a visitation that recalls the benighted, wandering wretch to himself, and overcomes his self-obscurity. Her sympathy possesses a power of reanimation that is at once surprising and familiar, and which works through the responsiveness she inspires in him. In this she resembles the Dorothy he will shortly address in *The Vale of Esthwaite* (after their reunion), and to whom he attributes a power of heavenly virtue and transcendence, as well as love:

Sister for whom I feel a love
What warms a Brother far above [...]
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 (454).

II.

14. Stephen Gill described *The Vale of Esthwaite* as the poem in which Wordsworth discovered “the richest sources of all his poetry”, through attachment to a locality, and the “conviction” that his own experience and “feelings demanded exploration in poetry” (32). Fosso and Wu similarly argue that a decisive autobiographical turn takes place within the poem. Specifically, both identify this with the poet’s reflexive engagement with his own grief in the early version of the “waiting for the horses” episode in *The Vale of Esthwaite*. Wu sees the lines as occasioned by family circumstance and the “delayed mourning of July 1787” that followed the June reunion of William, Christopher and John with Dorothy (13). In a letter to Jane Pollard in July, Dorothy wrote of how their grief for their parents decisively surfaced under the pressure of ill-treatment and disparagement in the household of their relatives, the Cooksons:

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... (Wu, 9)

The siblings are bound together one can say, in a familial prefiguring of the socialising bonds of commemoration that Fosso identifies Wordsworthian poetics.

15. But what of the passage itself? Although outwardly dependent in some respects on literary sources, the mountain scene of the boy's waiting for the new horses is "something more personal", as Wu notes, within this strange, disjunctive, phantasmagoric poem:

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. (7)

Here are the opening lines. As in the *The Prelude*, the exposed boy is left on the mountain, scouring the roads beneath and waiting for transport:⁶

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 (272-83)

This is certainly a very raw version of the later 1797 passage in *The Two-Part Prelude*, with its mixture of the quotidian, the visionary, and the deeply personal. Nonetheless, as in that later Goslar passage, there are seeds of aesthetic joy, power, and self-renewal, in this scene of wilderness and loss. Even in this early version, the boy is transfixed by the scattered elements of the winter scene, and responds to them as if they were mysterious hieroglyphs of his own subjection and belatedness. If the poem is a creative breakthrough, then, it is because of the ways Wordsworth as a poet is here detained yet invigorated by the possibility of raising to expression the boy's remembered sense of inexpression and destitution, and his impression of the mysterious poetry of this desolate scene, in which everything speaks of vulnerability, loss, and sadness. The rudimentary artifice that was internal to the child's passive, inchoate and unconscious registration of the scene, is here transmuted into an eloquent voicing of that very remembered sense of finitude and self-opacity.

16. Further, although the scene was one of isolation and powerlessness, it is specifically represented as containing within itself visionary possibilities indissociable from an enhanced sense of bodily self-awareness. This is so firstly in the way the boy's response identifies itself as common to all living things. He feels and hears the "wintry blast" as affecting everything, as all animated beings are obscurely united in their instinctual withdrawal within themselves. The sheer hardship of the

scene functions to reveal the essence of things, and to disclose the germs of relatedness discovered within the very bleak logic of survival. This automatic retreat of all living beings into a protective dormancy is an index, even revelation - however minimal - of commonalty and continuing life. It becomes the outwardly observed and inwardly felt sign of a power of nature that itself both transcends and dwells within everything. Secondly, this power is evident in the ways the poetry uses sound and rhythm, as well as imagery, to enact the corporeality of the boy's experience of himself in nature. The rhythmic accents and alliterative pairings forcefully convey the physical condition of mind, evident in the body's painful oppression and contraction – “the *wintry blast* / Through the *sharp* Hawthorn *whistling pass'd... poor* flocks all *pinch'd* with *cold... / Sad drooping*”.

17. And as it continues, the writing continues to suggest through its own reiterative features how the child's mind, like his body, became itself unconsciously fixated and subjected by the experience:

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

Then in a way that will become characteristic, there is the rapid turn towards a therapeutic meditation by which the self explicitly climbs clear of its immersive grief, and reflexively surveys it:

Flow on, in vain thou has 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 (446)

Mourning is now facilitated and the passing storm becomes a trope for the emotional one, as the breaking sun “gives my soul relief”. As in the Freudian notion of the mind's repair, then,

deliverance now comes from a conscious repetition of a memory that is no longer an unconscious repetition by it, so that the scene of loss, with its “steepy rock” and “sharp Hawthorn” become knowingly brought to consciousness. In this way, Wu can argue both that this scene resembles a Freudian screen-memory, and also that Wordsworth here suddenly confronts and releases his own buried grief, and mourns as if for the first time (16-18).

18. A striking contrast can be drawn between this episode with its windswept dry-stone wall, and that scene of rocky interiority from *The Vale of Esthwaite* that just precedes it, and that critics have also associated with Wordsworth’s vocation as a poet, but negatively, as a terrifying encounter with his own unconscious. If the “waiting for the horses” episode shows the speaker consciously discovering himself in and through a therapeutic and poetic repetition of the former scene, then this other passage exemplifies the unbridled Gothicism that also inhabits the poem, and bears out Kenneth Johnston’s insight that *The Vale of Esthwaite* “reads like the nightmare underside” of the autobiographical poet of the *The Prelude* (79). In this episode, the horror-struck youth is drawn into the “Black Hellvellyn’s inmost womb” by a ghost carrying a “poet’s harp of yore” (442). Jonathan Wordsworth memorably described the scene as if “some kind of initiation ceremony” were “taking place” (223). However, if so, it is an apprenticeship in terror, in a spectral incubation that leaves the speaker finding himself hag-ridden by “That spirit [] my grisly guide / [that] Each night my troubl’d spirit ride[s]” (442). This spectre’s shrill shrieking woeful music or song resounds in the hollow, petrified vault, and “cleaved mine ears”. It divides the young man from himself, overwhelming him with its unearthly power of inspiration and seemingly endless, unanswerable, haunting persistence, as “The vault a[lo]ng / Echoed the loud and dismal song” (442).

19. In these ways, the two passages from *The Vale of Esthwaite* can be taken as unfolding contrasting scenes of inspiration. The former, though bleak, offers a reduction of mind to its essential conditions, and stages the child’s experience of loss as an interruption of his vital connection to the world. Further, the passage’s acknowledgement of the need for mourning anticipates Wordsworth’s later conversions of grief into a restitution that draws on nature, and the accidents of intermissive events through which he must continually rediscover voice and vocation. However, the latter scene beneath Helvellyn is one that leaves the speaker mute and entrapped, in an imagination figured as a hollow, echoing, and shadowy cave possessed by ghosts of the

immemorial past. In this respect, Wu is again persuasive in associating this episode with “Now ye meet in the cave”, noting how the place of death in the latter poem, in undergoing “a series of transformations – from earth to sea, and finally to rock... strikingly... provides an analogue for the descent beneath Helvellyn” (39). In a compatible way, Fosso takes this as an encounter with a father-muse who initiates the poet into this “scene of woe” as if it were an archetype that his poetry will hereafter reproduce:

out of the womb-like, haunted grave, in signs that localize the loss in his father’s death, generalize it in terms of Helvellyn’s regional Cumbrian history (and its dead), and materialize it in a haunting language of tropes (40).

Repetition then does not here lead out of the self, to a redemptive poetic expression rooted in nature and a therapeutic relatedness that binds present, past and future, and self and others. Rather, it leads inwards. The natural world encloses a charnel-house, and as Fosso says, the scene is both tomb-like and womb-like, as if the places of birth and death were interchangeable. Inside the mountain, the poet has a vision of the defeat of the Cumbrian King, Dunmail:

I saw the Ghosts and heard the yell...
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 shadows is all my own] (444).

The typography of parenthesis appear appropriate for this speaker whose sensibility leaves him suspended, “Far far amid the shadowy world”, and only able to express his dislocation through alarmingly hollow, echoic and negative repetitions (“the shadowy world”, “the world unknown”, “The world of shadows”). One can imagine also the resonances of this epic defeat for the young Wordsworth, who perceived himself so unjustly dispossessed by the injustice of his father’s treatment at the hands of the Lowthers.

20. Finally here, before turning to “Now ye meet in the cave”, it is worth recapitulating briefly some of the important connections between that fragment and these rudimentary texts. In the Helvellyn passage in *The Vale of Esthwaite* and the Orpheus translations, one can detect how each poem, like “Now ye meet in the cave” centres on a self who is constrained and impaired by a mysterious, shadowy muse associated with the world of death. In the first text, he is agonizingly subjected by

an uncanny visitant who terrifyingly captivates him, while in the Orpheus poem, he is bound inescapably to Eurydice in a comparably fatal way. As in “Now ye meet in the cave” the male protagonist is displaced from nature, and inhabits a crepuscular reality, while the distinctions of past and present, the living and the dead, the self and another person, nature and fantasy, memory and experience, appear confused and contradictory. Contrastingly, in the sonnet to Helen Maria Williams and the waiting for the horses episode in *The Vale of Esthwaite*, one discerns a mind that is seeking to wrest renewal and illumination from his own turmoil, and reflecting on how to overcome and transform, as well as express, his disorientation.

III.

21. Paul Fry identified Wordsworth’s originality with the strange, levelling, ontological imperative, whereby (his italics) the “*poetry discloses the unity constituted by and as the being, apart from meaning, and apart even from difference, of all human and nonhuman things*” (9). This formulation valuably emphasizes the eventual nature of Wordsworth’s art, where the poet finds the philosophical dimension of his vision, not in transcending the world, but in the occasions when it returns to him. This corresponds with elements in the previous discussion, where we could detect how the youthful poet in the “waiting for the horses” episode cleaved to the bare facticity of the remembered scene, as if it were a way of delivering himself from the metaphysical confusion and dislocation that was so evident in that poem’s crepuscular world of thrilling, shrieking spectres and Gothic excess. In such a way, the mountain passage is so significant (like the “Sonnet for Helen Maria Williams”) because it indicates the decisive turn the work is beginning to take, as the youthful poet identifies his own voice with an overcoming of his own dejected and solipsistic subjectivity.
22. However, this way of putting it also indicates the essential differences between this account and Fry’s, and briefly spelling these out provides a useful access to the final section’s exploration of “Now ye meet in the cave”. To begin with, the main premise here is that the poem can be approached as a very personal document, expressing a profoundly private and privative sense of the self. Read as such, it gives us a peculiarly direct access into Wordsworth’s early melancholy and self-opacity, while underlining the importance of the reunion of the siblings that Wu identifies as up to a year later. Confounding as the poem is in its *mise-en-scène*, it nonetheless provides an

important contrast in these respects with the “Sonnet for Helen Maria Williams” and the “waiting for the horses” episode of *The Vale of Esthwaite*. There the poet’s self-renewal appeared a function of a redemptive connection - to another person, or to his younger self. In “Now ye meet in the cave”, though, his privacy appears a function of the claustrophobic intimacy that encloses his subjectivity, so that he is at once pained and burdened by this woman’s wishes for burial.

- 23.** So, how might this discussion be extended by a closer attention to the mysterious “Now ye meet in the cave”?;

Now ye meet in the cave
husband sons and all
if ye've hands oh make a grave
for she dies she dies she dies
She wishes not for a grave
bear into the salt sea, for
Where you lie there she will lie
Oh bear her into the salt sea
If ye wish her peace [?oh] bear
Bear her to the salt sea bear
[] by
The very spot where you do lie
With your [?wives] by day
In the coffins of the rock
What has she [to] do with the churchyard (671)

The speaker's words are wholly possessed by the issue of the woman's interment that repeats itself over and again as his burden - in both senses of the word. His consuming desire is that they will bear her to the sea ("she dies she dies she dies ... bear into the salt sea ... Oh bear her ... bear / Bear her to the salt sea bear"). Though his words attempt to alleviate his desperation, they appear merely to renew it. It is as if the poem - for all its mysterious reiterative shapelessness and obscurity - were an expression of a mercilessly inescapable and self-defeating logic at work in this oppressed psyche, and these failing (and flailing) words. His words appear to control him. His intonations billow and break, conveying a mind gripped by a frantic, incommunicable sense

of self-evidence, his tone all the more crazed because he draws no response from those he addresses, while the reader also struggles to understand.

24. Further, although we feel confident that these are not the words of a child, his tones and accents resemble those of some lost and distressed young boy whose frantic, redoubled insistence assumes we understand what and whom he is talking about. So, he trades in certainties: in the familial (“husbands, sons and all”) and the familiar, through definite articles that invoke commonly known locations (“the cave”, “the salt sea”, “the coffins of the rock”, “the very spot”, and “the churchyard”). Yet at the same time, the unknown (or undecided) location of the woman’s burial remains crucially unspecified, identified by the indefinite article (“a grave”) and identified with the possibility of a marine burial (“the salt sea”). To this one can add the confusions that follow from the fact that the poem ends with words that could be taken to imply that she has, actually, already been buried in a conventional, Christian grave, even as the question repudiates the idea: “What has she [to] do with the churchyard”.
25. It is all too comprehensible that such bewildering, perhaps unfathomable, aspects of the poem can defeat us if these words can leave us uncertain as to whether they are describing fantasy or reality, and whether the woman is alive or dead. Nonetheless, this piece has followed the intuition that the importance of “Now ye meet in the cave” derives from its peculiarly direct expression of a mind in the grip of such radical uncertainties and contradictions, and reflecting on this it is worth drawing out some further key aspects that surface in reading here.
26. Firstly, the poem’s status as a repeated, desperate injunction is clear. The speaker’s words continually relapse into an expression of horror or grief, his hopelessness feeding off itself. He is radically divided from others, and subject to an uncanny inwardness with the woman whose privileged spokesperson he is (“She wishes not for a grave”...). Secondly, the language is itself perpetually disjunctive, its circulating, opaque intensities of meaning corresponding to the speaker’s own dissociation, and the circuits of his urgently repeated, yet defeated, desire to find a resting place. His reiterations possess a recursive, contradictory logic that is inescapable, so that thought itself appears an involuntary predicament. It is as if subjectivity were experienced as mere subjection, as a consciousness merely of confusion and oppression. Thirdly, affectively speaking, his words appear equivocally driven both by his need to express his poignant intimacy

with the dead beloved, and by his need to rid himself of it, even to exorcise it: seemingly through the burial that he and she so desire.

27. In these respects, the speaker's tenure on his own subjectivity appears at stake in what he says.

The woman is not merely the object of his words, but appears incorporated within them, like an incubus whose voice and imagined wishes infiltrate, even possess, his own. In all these respects, he resembles a figure laboring under an enchantment, consumed by the desperate hope that he can release himself from his enthrallment by recruiting others to assist him in untangling the riddle that ensnares him. Finally then, these comments suggest how the poem can be read as offering an allegory of the self's uncertain constitution, as if only the alternatives of rock or rolling water, fixity or unrestrained movement, could express the uncertainties of this voice figured and trapped within this cave of contradictions.

IV.

28. In this final section I want briefly to suggest further powerful connections that can be drawn from this reading of "Now ye meet in the cave" - as a document of haunted, disintegrative interiority - to the inter-related philosophical and biographical dimensions of Wordsworth's writing. Beginning with the philosophical, against Fry's more Heideggerian reading, I would take up Stanley Cavell's account of the sceptical impulse that inhabits and provokes Romanticism. For Cavell, Romanticism is an engagement with the exorbitant ambition of scepticism, which manifests itself in the mind's desire to transcend mere finitude in pursuit of a self-elevating metaphysical mastery that denies mutability. In his 1983 Beckford lectures, *In Quest of the Ordinary*,⁷ Cavell identified such a world-negating attitude with scepticism and identified Wordsworth as an exemplary writer given to write "texts of recovery" - where the recovery is both of the self and of the world, through the acknowledgement of finitude:

When Wordsworth dedicated his poetry, in his preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, to arousing men in a particular way from a "torpor," the way he sought was "to make the incidents of common life interesting," as if he saw us as having withdrawn our interest, or investment, from whatever worlds we have in common, say this one or the next (32).⁸

In turn, one might trace this to Wordsworth's own description of his youthful self in the *Fenwick Notes*, and its abyssal sense of reality:

...I was often unable to think of external things as having external existence & I communed with all that I saw as something not apart from but inherent in my own immaterial nature. Many times while going to school have I grasped at a wall or tree to recall myself from this abyss of idealism to that reality. At that time I was afraid of such processes (160).

Cavell's account of scepticism is too rich and far-reaching to begin to do justice to here, but it is worth stressing how closely his language for the sceptic's imagining of a lost world echoes Wordsworthian formulations, and even the impression of radical privacy conveyed by "Now ye meet in the cave". For Cavell the sceptic masks his flight from the intimacies of ordinary existence, and the criteria of ordinary language, by this self-aggrandizing desire "which I described as being sealed off from the world", as if it were an object in need of cognitive proof:

The philosopher's experiences of trying to *prove* that it is there is [...] one of trying to establish an absolutely firm connection with that world-object from that sealed position. It is as though, deprived of the ordinary forms of life in which that connection is, and is alone, secured, he is trying to re-establish it in his immediate consciousness, then and there. (This has its analogues in non-philosophical experience, normal and abnormal) [*The Claim of Reason* 238].

29. Further and significantly, this passage clearly brings to mind that far more centrally Wordsworthian text, "A Slumber did my Spirit Seal", a poem whose status and tone are very different from "Now ye meet in the cave", but whose equally mysterious aura is arguably derived from the speaker's similarly complex imaginative intimacy with the buried female. In fact, both poems might be read as betraying a sensibility both captivated and divided by a sceptical denial of the knowledge of mortality. In this respect, both also voice a persona who is uncertainly caught between a conscious, unconsolated acknowledgement of death, and a residual, underlying, protective fantasy of life-in-death. In this way, he preserves an intimate connection, as if the event of death had left both, reciprocally, neither quite dead or alive. Many critics have pondered the mysterious suspensions of the knowledge of death in "A Slumber did my Spirit Seal", and the way they can even extend into the second stanza. To take one example, Mark Edmundson implies the transfer of voice or vision from a dead muse to the living poet who incorporates her:

...one might see a poem like "A slumber did my spirit seal" as an effort to preserve contact with the feminine while externalizing it... the fatal muse is present, dispersed,

but not mortally close. It is the poet who both hears and sees with the acuity that Lucy once possessed (122).

30. Elsewhere, I have suggested that the mystery of the poem might be traced to the ways it can be read as both staging and denying death, while incorporating the absent girl within both the self, as muse, and the external world, as nature.⁹ Further suggestions were that such an affective pattern was both derived from Wordsworth's childhood sense of loss and repeating itself in the poem, perhaps in conjunction with his imagining of the loss of Dorothy (as Coleridge suggested), or even with his actual sense of the absence of the young Caroline. On such a reading, the poem becomes readable as an expressive and reflexive engagement with his own affectivity.¹⁰
31. More broadly, though, it is useful at this point to note also that clinically some such imagined connection is seen as inevitable, indeed automatic and universal - according to the Harvard Child Bereavement Study - in children who lose their mother at the age Wordsworth lost his.¹¹ For such children, thought circulates between incommensurable perspectives (in ways that correspond to all bereavement, perhaps, but more radically). They know of death, but affectively they refuse it, suspending their knowledge by more or less unconsciously imagining the deceased is still out there, interfused with everything, rolled round in the universe at large, and watching over. In a similar vein, Jill Krementz in her book of children's testimonies quotes the words of Peggy, aged eleven, whose father had died when she was eight (nearly Wordsworth's age when his mother died):
- I don't think I can grasp the fact that my father is really lying there underneath the ground. I think of him more as a ghostlike person floating around everywhere. And I do keep thinking that one day maybe he'll come back (29-30).
32. My aim in preferring this connection to child psychology is not to offer a reductive explanatory schema for the poetry, but, as with the connection to Cavell's work, to expand our ways of talking about some of the double binds and opacities that configure Wordsworth's work, and that are evident in the affective, philosophical and psychoanalytical aspects of his writing. Specifically though, I believe the findings of the psychological research enhance Wu's suggestion that "Now ye meet in the cave" can be associated with Wordsworth's mother. In this light, the fragment can be read as a peculiarly powerful manifestation of this underlying fantasy structure whereby the

child's psyche exchanges part of its hold on everyday reality for the fantasy of the mother's continuing existence. For a mind constituted in such a divided way, an imagined bond, as between child and parent, transcends death itself, but tends to confound in the process the demarcations of logic and time, the distinctions of self and other, inside and outside, the real and the imagined. Within the spectral, dissociated interiority of "Now ye meet in the cave" on such a reading, death and life circulate without resolution. The self haunts his world, having bargained his corporeality and vitality for the continuing connection with the lost parent whose death he cannot accept, yet which he also overwhelmingly, if equivocally, desires, captive as he is to the beloved woman whose uncertain burial he incorporates within himself.¹²

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¹ Kurt Fosso is another critic who has also explored the adolescent work, and stressed the lifelong centrality of loss and mourning in Wordsworth's work and sensibility. Yet unlike Wu, Fosso neglects to mention "Now ye meet in the cave", even though its central scenario is so clearly relevant to his defining sense of the mature poetry's abiding invocation and forging of communal contexts of mourning and grief. On the face of it, this is all the more important, since the poem provides an interesting counter-case to Fosso's thesis (in that it appears so strikingly to express the speaker's utter failure to establish the shared bonds of grief). However, it may be that also the poem fails to hold Fosso because it so obviously itself lacks public identity, resistant as it is to generic categorisation. In this respect also it clearly contrasts with the many other juvenile offerings that Fosso does write about, and that are far more unified, and clearly recognisable, as self-styled dirges, epitaphs, ballads, classical imitations, sonnets, elegies, tales, translations and lyrics.

² The use of "ye" rather than "we" implies further his separation from the group.

³ There are for instance, the Chatterton-influenced "Dirges". Two tell of a dying woman and a dead minstrel, while a third is narrated in the first person by a speaker who imagines being remembered "when I shall be no more" (580). Other poems even manage to invoke theological formulae while unravelling the distinctions between life and death in comparable, unorthodox ways. In, "Sonnet written by Mr ---- immediately after the death of his Wife", Wordsworth - more conventionally - rehearses Christian images of resurrection and the Heaven where "immortal rivers roll" (393).

⁴ Of course, one can point out that grammar would dictate the identity of "sleeping" with "the soft moonbeam", but even this might be said to come to the same thing, since the idea of the "soft moonbeam sleeping" implies the reciprocal tender sentience of those below who might be affected by such softness and beauty.

⁵ The scenario of a rocky materiality recurs in the series of overlapping sketches identified as "Storm Fragments", in which an actual eagle becomes first the metaphorical eagle of the storm, and then the

eagle-like castle of Fragment VIII. In these fragments, the hollow caves and sublime mountains, the shrieking storm and surging water, appear as ominous archetypes that inspire Wordsworth's mind, as well as allegorical figures for identifying it. These fragments, like "Now ye meet in the cave", clearly anticipate Wordsworth's way of using landscape as occasion and figure for subjectivity. Clearly, though in these cases the speaker remains stranded in the dejected, bereft interiority that the poem expresses and figures, whereas in so many later poems, the natural setting is condition, cause and figure for a transporting inspiration, as the poet's voice and mood become uplifted and regenerated by the mind's sympathetic interfusion with the world outside himself.

⁶ Mary Moorman, citing Book XII of *The Prelude*, identifies the spot as "a point about a mile north of Hawkshead, "an eminence " or "ridge of rough ground whence he could command a view of the two roads, one from the Wrynose Pass and Little Langdale and the other from Skelwith and Ambleside, down either of which the ponies might be expected" (68-69).

⁷ This Cavellian thinking promises to become an important strand in Wordsworthian criticism. So writers such as Richard Eldridge, Timothy Gould, David Rudrun, and Edward Duffy (see Works Cited) have explored those moments, narrated in the "Immortality Ode" or *The Prelude*, where Wordsworth writes of his youthful sense of the world as if he suffered from the terrifying sense that he were excluded from it, as if were subject to disappearing from his view and his grasp.

⁸ Indeed, Cavell was to remember in *In Quest of the Ordinary* how writing the last part of his major philosophical text, *The Claim of Reason* he was continually distracted by the way that "the outcropping of moments and lines of romanticism" "kept pressing for attention" (6).

⁹ See John Hughes (11-19).

¹⁰ See Hughes, Works Cited, *The Explicator*.

¹¹ See the references to J. William Worden and Phyllis Silverman in the Works Cited.

¹² Again the issue of burial might even figure the melancholy of the speaker, who appears, as if in some quasi-occult Abraham and Torok family scenario, to incorporate within himself the undead phantasm of his mother, whose wishes survive her death, dispossessing her son of knowledge, and cryptically influencing the poem.