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A "World of Shades"

The Birth of Community in the Juvenilia

> Recoiling from a gloom too deep.
> —*The Vale of Esthwaite*

Wordsworth is quick to lead readers back to his early life as a source or cipher for his later poetical talent and preoccupations. He contends in *The Prelude* and elsewhere that his views on "Nature, Man, and Society" were shaped in those years, and describes his best piece of juvenilia, *The Vale of Esthwaite,* as containing "thoughts and images most of which have been dispersed through my other [i.e., later] writings" (*PW* 1: 318). Readers must of course proceed cautiously in undertaking so Romantic and vexatious a pursuit, of which Wordsworth himself was wary: "Who knows the individual hour in which / His habits were first sown, even as a seed . . . ?" (*13P* 2.211–12). Yet in the writings of Wordsworth's youth one does in fact find traces of the poet's mature views and interests, including traces integral to his later conception of a "spiritual community binding together the living and the dead."

That social formation is for the Wordsworth of these early years very much "something to be labored upon and worked through,"[1] to be haphazardly articulated in the morning light of creation. He will not provide the model its clearest realization for a whole decade, in *The Ruined Cottage.* Yet, although Wordsworth's later, mature conception of "spiritual community" is relatively undeveloped in the poems he composes between 1785 and 1787, certain of its crucial elements nonetheless take root during this "fair seed time"

of his life. They become established in childhood experiences of death and familial fragmentation; in a milieu of social, political, and economic transformation; and in Wordsworth's extensive reading of ancient and modern literary works treating death, melancholy, and lamentation. In these experiences his views of the social power of death and memorialization take their start, to become thereafter a shaping force in his poetry and its unfolding sociology.

I. "Never Ceasing Moan[s]": Death and Mourning in the Hawkshead-Cambridge Poems

During Christmas vacation of 1784–85, the first anniversary of his father's death and nearly six years after his spotting of the drowned schoolmaster's pile of clothes beside Esthwaite Water, Wordsworth composed his first self-motivated poem. The verses have not survived, but Kenneth Johnston deduces they likely treated the subject of change, turning "compulsively on changes in his life" occasioned by his father's death, in keeping with "the majority of his verses surviving from this period" (*HW* 96). A year and a half after the death of his father, in 1785 Wordsworth undertook his first significant poetical task, composing celebratory lines for the bicentenary of Hawkshead School. Two years later he had composed his second "public" poem and his first published work, the sensationalistic "Sonnet, on seeing Miss Helen Maria Williams weep at a Tale of Distress" (1787), which appeared in *European Magazine*. Although the evidence does not suggest prodigious writing on Wordsworth's part, these works, along with his other surviving writings, attest to his seriousness and ambitiousness as a fledgling poet. Under the guidance of Hawkshead's encouraging, poetry-loving schoolmasters Taylor and Bowman, and with such praise from an older student who asked, "How is it, Bill, thee doest write such good verses?" (*WL* 31), Wordsworth seems to have taken to poetry writing with a measure of enthusiasm. And while it is arguably true that neither of the above-mentioned poems gives an "indication of what was really promising in Wordsworth's schoolboy writing," Stephen Gill is right in observing that other of his Hawkshead poetry shows considerable promise (31).

Admittedly, aside from a few poetical fragments jotted by Wordsworth in his brother Christopher's notebook, and two public poems, little survives of Wordsworth's early poetry that can definitively be dated to before his matriculation at Cambridge in October 1787 (*EPF* 24–25). But of the finished poems recorded in his much prized leather-bound notebook, since labeled DC MS. 2, a number may have been composed during or before the summer and fall of 1787, the time of his departure from the vale.[2] One of the earliest of these Hawkshead poems (the notebook's first pages are missing), "Anacreon

Imitated" is a school exercise dated by its author, probably to its time of composition, "August 7, 1786." Carol Landon and Jared Curtis, the editors of Cornell's edition of Wordsworth's *Early Poems and Fragments, 1785–1797,* conjecture the poem to have been copied from another manuscript (MS. 4), where it is accompanied by three other poems also probably composed between 1786 and 1787, and of more interest to this study for their marked interest in death: "Sonnet written by M^r _____ immediately after the death of his Wife," a short imitation of Alexander Pope's "Elegy to the Memory of an Unfortunate Lady" entitled "On the death of an unfortunate Lady," and the four-line Thomsonian "Fragment of an Ode to winter." The titles paint a fair picture of Wordsworth's fascination not just with death but also with mourning. That image becomes clearer still in a list of all but three of the works recorded in the notebook: "The Death of the Starling" (one of two translations of Catullus), a *Lycidas* imitation titled "The Dog—An Idyllium," a ballad, and, from around January 1788, two dirges, two epitaphs, a "Tale" about a grief-maddened woman, and extracts from the death-haunted narrative of *The Vale of Esthwaite*. This list well supports Duncan Wu's observation that most of the poems Wordsworth wrote between his first attempts at poetry and his 1787 departure "are concerned with death."[3] The writings moreover reveal the young poet's fascination with the lingering inadequacy of mourning, an important facet of his mature social scheme of "spiritual community." His translation of "The Death of the Starling," for example, strips Catullus's poem of all its irony, taking seriously the poet's lament for his lady's loved pet and lamenting, as in "The Dog," the absence of the forces or personages—gods, nature, fellow poets—required to mourn the dead sufficiently.

Of these varied works from the Hawkshead era, one other poem apart from *The Vale of Esthwaite* merits closer attention for the manner in which it discloses a kind of outline of its author's emerging and developing views about the dead. Like the contemporary *Vale,* this early work deserves to be read as more than just the autobiographical lament of a grieving or morbid schoolboy, however much its subject matter may have arisen from Wordsworth's personally felt losses. Composed in March of 1787, the sentimental "Ballad" ("And will you leave me thus alone") appears to have been modeled on David Mallet's popular Revival ballad "Margaret's Ghost" in Percy's *Reliques* anthology, and on Thomas Tickell's similar "Lucy and Colin," which follows that text in Percy.[4] Wordsworth's kindred tale of a lovelorn abandoned woman, named Mary, was likely also based upon Ann Tyson's account of her Lakeland neighbor Mary Rigge, who had, like her fictional counterparts, been deserted by her lover and then pined away, dying at age twenty-one.[5] "Ballad" is chiefly concerned with unrequited love, abandonment, and with a lover's inability emotionally to let go of her cruel beloved—topoi of the sentimental ballads on which the poem was modeled. But it is the less obvious answer to the maid's

opening question to her lover, "And will you leave me thus alone . . . ?" (*EPF,* l. 1), that in fact guides the narrative and reveals its social meaning. That answer to Mary's appeal comes, belatedly, in her memorialization:

> Her knell was rung—the Virgins came
> And kiss'd her in her shroud
> The children touch'd—'twas all they durst
> They touch'd and wept aloud.
>
> The next day to the grave they went
> All flock'd around her bier
> —Nor hand without a flower was there
>   Nor eye without a tear.——
>
> (57–64)

Here the dead draw the living to flock around them, consolidating what seemed elsewhere to be lacking. In doing so, the living form an ad hoc community comprised of those now shepherded together by mortal loss and its memorialization. Of course, Wordsworth scarcely invented either lingering loss or the communal powers of mourning; they are stock elements of elegy, ballad, epitaph, and even the Eucharist. "Lucy and Colin" itself relates that often at its deceased couple's shared grave "the constant hind / And plighted maid are seen."[6] The same can be said for ballads like "The Bride's Burial" or "A Lamentable Ballad of the Lady's Fall."[7] Wordsworth might also have carried over this element from his personal experience with loss or from having observed Lake District funerals. All the same, "Ballad" attests to its author's fascination with the motif of interminable grief.

Behind Mary's deathbed recollection of a prophecy that her "head would soon lie low" (42) are the dying words of Hawkshead master Taylor. *The Prelude* records that "[a] week, or little less, before his death" he said to Wordsworth, "[m]y head will soon lie low" (*13P* 10.501–2). James Averill argues that Wordsworth interpolates Taylor's prophetic words "to exploit their deep, if personal, emotional significance . . . to endow a conventional and imitative fiction with tragic emotions" (*PHS* 43), much as the poet did with the story of Mary Rigge. One may also argue that he sought to connect the poem not only to his own life but also to Lakeland social history, as one of those "tragic facts / Of rural history" to which the 1799 *Prelude* will refer. Wordsworth in effect is indirectly memorializing Taylor as well as Rigge, painting a social scene of loss much as he will do with schoolmaster Jackson in the Drowned Man episode. This topos of communal grief may appear commonplace or trivial, but, as the allusion to Taylor's loss suggests, it was for Wordsworth an element of considerable importance. As readers find in the

poet's later writings, a wrong or inadequacy connected with mortal loss has the power to draw a poem's speaker to mourn and to bond with other mourners, and thereby form a community.

The persistence of mournful observance, and of its social and poetical effects, is one of the implicit, and at times relatively explicit, subjects of Wordsworth's finest composition from this Hawkshead-to-Cambridge period: his valedictory narrative *The Vale of Esthwaite*. But although the *Vale* is chronologically next in line for analysis, it is best approached by way of the poet's translation of a portion of Virgil's *Georgics* IV, jotted at Cambridge in 1788 in the same notebook (MS. 5) as two of the "Various Extracts" from the *Vale*. Wordsworth's translation, titled "Orpheus and Eurydice" by Ernest de Selincourt in *Poetical Works* and listed as "Georgics Translation IX" in the Cornell edition, is by far the most sustained and ambitious of the poet's renderings of selections from Virgil's bucolic poem, and its thematic similarity to the *Vale,* which Wordsworth was then revising, makes its pairing and use as a prolegomenon of sorts appropriate.

Bruce Graver helpfully describes Virgil's Orpheus epyllion as the tale "of a bereft spouse who is destroyed both psychologically and physically by the intensity of [his] grief."[8] Wu, for his part, speculates that what Wordsworth found so "compelling" about this particular portion of Book IV was Orpheus's "grief at his failure to restore Eurydice to the physical world"[9]—in other words, this hero's troubled mourning of her loss. In Wordsworth's rather loose translation, Orpheus, upon returning from Hades to the world above,

> Felt his dear wife the sweet approach of Light
> Following behind—ah why did fate impose
> This cruel mandate—*source of all his woes*[?]
> When [   ] a sudden madness stole
> His swimming senses from the lover's soul. . . .
> He turn'd and gaz'[d]
>   And thrice a dismal shriek
> From Hell's still waters thrice was heard to break. . . .
>   (18–22, 27–29; original emphasis)[10]

This originary elegiac poet is described as thereafter singing his "[tale] of sorrow o'er and o'er" (45) in a lament likened to the forlorn nightingale's mourning "with low sighs and sadly pleasing tongue" (52). Wordsworth's translation likely follows Dryden's rendering of these lines, associating Orpheus's "sighs," as Virgil does not,[11] with the mourning elegies of the nightingale. Wordsworth's verses more directly connect the bird, by her "low sighs," to her human antitype's repeated sighs, stressing, Graver argues, much "more

emphatically than Virgil the ways in which the bird is a poet like Orpheus, whose magical power springs from the rending pain of grief."[12] In fact the phrase "o'er and o'er" appears to be Wordsworth's, not Virgil's,[13] echoing to Wu's ear as to my own *The Vale of Esthwaite*'s important repetition of "sighs . . . o'er and o'er."[14] "Orpheus and Eurydice" and the *Vale* indeed both "construct comparable myths designed," Wu says, "to satisfy the . . . drive towards retrieval" of the dead.[15]

"Twice robbed of his wife" (*Georgics* IV.504), Orpheus mourns a double loss owed to losing Eurydice in the very act of retrieving her. He may find solace in the survival of his dying poetic lament, but that lament and its perpetuity stem from the irredeemable and interminable character of her death. Singing "o'er and o'er" his elegiac "tale of sorrow," Orpheus in this way epitomizes an open-eyed refusal to negate or replace the dead. His grief characterizes him, in Freud's binary scheme, not as the typical mourner, who declares "the object to be dead" by accepting a substitute for it, but as the melancholic, who "struggle[s]" with "ambivalence" (*SE* 14: 257), acknowledging loss while resisting all mediating symbolic substitutes. Much like the minstrel of "Ballad," Orpheus refuses to replace the lost beloved with a substituting trope that would, as Freud himself conceded, as a substitute remain "at an essential remove from what it replaces."[16] Nonetheless, Kathleen Woodward rightly argues that Freud "leaves no theoretical room for another place, one between a crippling melancholia and the end of mourning."[17] It is on this middle ground that many of Wordsworth's protagonists stand, as Orphic mourners who resist substitution and its cessation of grief. That resistance indeed produces and further defines Orpheus's quest-like lamentation and song—a song linked not just to Eurydice's loss but to his failure to retrieve her, to translate her lost presence somehow back into life rather than into the repeated, mediating echoes he hears and, in death, becomes. As the *Vale* suggests, "o'er" is, in this way, *more*. Orpheus's troubled grief over a death no material mediation can recover, as a debt no tribute can pay, thereafter becomes the focus for a lineage of others' elegies of loss, including Wordsworth's own, as in that best piece of his Hawkshead-era poetry.

II. *The Vale of Esthwaite*'s Secret Promise

> Come thou for I know what kind
> of grief is heavy at my heart's core . . .
> oh exert all thy art for grief at
> my heart.
>
> —Fragment
> (*Vale* Affinitive Piece [AP] VIII)

Wordsworth recalled *The Vale of Esthwaite* to have been "[w]ritten . . . in the Spring and Summer" of 1787 (*EPF* 149). Certainly begun, at the latest, by the eve of his departure from Hawkshead for Cambridge, the valedictory poem was by far his most ambitious composition to date, and is for its readers today by most any measure "an altogether more interesting prelude to his mature work" than anything else he had written (*WL* 31). Yet, since the text's belated publication in the 1940s, in an appendix to the first volume of *Poetical Works*,[18] it has largely either been dismissed as juvenile scribbling or been plundered for the few biographical clues it could provide about its author's developing psychology. This was in part the case with Geoffrey Hartman's psychological reading of the *Vale,* which for years remained one of the poem's few extended analyses and is to this day still one of the most convincing (*WP* 76–89).[19] But in recent years the poem's literary stock has risen, owed in part to the injection of critical capital by new, even more persuasive advocates. Wu, for one, has focused much-needed attention on the work's imagery and dynamics, while Johnston has examined the *Vale*'s generic form and the poem's "compulsive" reiteration of gothic horrors that remain "intensely personal" (*HW* 106–7). John Turner has persuasively argued that the emphasis on "the capacity to mourn" which so typifies Wordsworth's great poem of the dead, *The Ruined Cottage,* can be traced back to the *Vale*'s own "mighty debt of grief."[20] Landon and Curtis's edition of the juvenilia promises to attract still more attention to this early, intriguing poem. After all, as mentioned above, the poet himself described the *Vale* as containing ideas "dispersed" throughout his later work. And a good number of these ideas and topoi, some of them markedly social in character, can be gleaned from the poem, despite the surviving text's fragmentary state.

That text certainly presents challenges to the reader or editor. In the notes to his premier edition of *The Vale of Esthwaite,* de Selincourt argued, for example, that a "good deal of the [original] poem is lost," and speculated the missing pages might have been added to the later, similarly locodescriptive narrative *An Evening Walk* (*PW* 1: 368). Wordsworth recollected an original "long poem" of "many hundred lines" (*FN* 6), which may or may not have extended beyond the surviving text. In a laudable but problematical attempt to reconstruct that long-lost *Ur-Vale* of MS. 3, where seven pages seemed to have been "cut out," de Selincourt interpolated several passages culled from two other manuscripts (MSS. 2 and 5), conjectured by him with some cause to have "probably [been] a part" of those lost pages' contents (*PW* 1: 273). Especially significant among these added portions are twenty-eight lines of a gothic episode copied along with lines nearly identical to those recorded in MS. 3 (*PW,* ll. 240–67; cf. *EPF* Extract XVI, ll. 31–58). This text follows nine lines about "the tempest's dirge," which perfectly fit back in the latter manuscript (at line 160, as de Selincourt saw), whence they may well have originated.[21]

The passage is of considerable importance to understanding *The Vale of Esth-waite*'s oddly convoluted narrative, and needs to be read in closer conjunction with the bulk of that text than its relegation to an "extract" in the Cornell edition may suggest.[22] With this in mind, I treat these twenty-eight *Vale* lines (preserved in MS. 5) as a piece of Wordsworth's original composition.

The MS. 3 text of the *Vale* can be divided into three sections (*EPF*, ll. 1–132, 133–272, 273–379), to which the Cornell edition appends the manuscript's succeeding tributes to Dorothy (380–87) and to Wordsworth's Hawkshead friend John Fleming (388–97)—and to which I follow de Selincourt in appending the succeeding "Adieu" to Hawkshead (*EPF* AP V). The narrative can further be divided into approximately thirteen parts, three of which are gothic episodes and one a paternal elegy followed by further elegiac reflections. The three gothic scenes and the elegy alternate with, and rather "knock askew" (*HW* 106), locodescriptive portions written along the lines of Milton's *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*. I refer to the gothic descents as Episodes one, two, and three—Episode two being comprised in part of those above-mentioned twenty-eight lines—and to the elegiac lines as Episode four.

The *Vale* opens with fairly typical eighteenth-century locodescription, describing its lone speaker's wanderings amid his beloved "landskip's varied treasure" (*VE*, l. 2). But the ensuing, broadly topographical lines are concerned less with terrestrial description of Esthwaite's pastures than with the speaker's melancholy travels and, especially, with his three subterranean descents into "gloomy glades" (25). As Johnston observes, just about wherever the reader "slices into" this most "compulsive text," he or she will find "the same poem," for like an anxious dream the *Vale* "is highly repetitive" (*HW* 106).[23] The three gothic episodes indeed are even at first glance so similar as to suggest they may allegorize the same underlying thing. And of them the second episode most clearly and temptingly directs the reader to a "treasure" beneath its textual surface, and so serves a helpful point of entry into *The Vale of Esthwaite*'s intricate (some might say disordered) narrative structure. In this decidedly gothic scene, a specter leads the poem's speaker from a "haunted Castle's pannel'd room" down

> to [a] dungeon deep
> And stopp'd and thrice her head she shook
> More pale and ghastly seem'd her look
> [   ] view'd [*shew'd*]
> An iron coffer mark'd with blood[.]
> The taper turn'd from blue to red
> Flash'd out—and with a shriek she fled. . . .
>
> (Extract XVI, 32, 48–54)[24]

Terrified, the speaker attempts to flee "[w]ith arms in horror spread around," only to find some "form unseen . . . / Twist round my hand an icy chain / And drag me to the spot again" (55–58). In Wordsworth's day, as now, the word *coffer* meant a "strongbox" or "chest" containing treasure ("coffers"). But a more obscure sense survived: a "coffin."[25] Such a connection makes sense in this context of a "ghastly" and bloody "spot," in a poem that concerns not just ghosts but the death and burial of the speaker's father, along with the son's guilty feelings about that loss.

While the ironclad coffer begs (or "shrieks") to be deciphered, its ambiguous description nonetheless largely conceals its function in this scene and whatever contents it hides from view. Still, it seems reasonable to read the coffer as a safe containing "treasure" of some kind or, what is even more likely given the scene's gothic locale and the poem's ghostly, elegiac character, as a blood-stained coffin concealing a corpse. In either case, however, the coffer hides *what* it hides but not entirely *that* it hides, and so insinuates the possible presence of some secret treasure concealed within, a treasure associated with revisitation and with the "unseen" hands and binding chains of the dead. That the *Vale* opened with the speaker's appreciation of the landscape's "treasure," that at the poem's midpoint (Extract XVI) he discovers a hidden "iron coffer," and that the narrative concludes, in MS. 3's trailing passages, with his imminent descent into "Mammon's joyless mine" (AP V, l. 14), suggests not only that the coffer is the container of some withheld treasure but also that such a subterranean container or content is connected to the narrative's repetitions and revisitations. After all, the poem's poet-speaker[26] is not just ushered to this ghoulish locale; he is physically forced back to it, specifically to the coffer's highly charged *spot*. Whether one reads the coffer's undisclosed treasure either as a corpse or as something merely associated with death (with ghosts and blood), the episode's dead serve as the dreaded object of descent and as a force of visitation.

The poem's fourth episode, similarly recounted in Book 9 of the 1805 *Prelude*, presents a further vantage for the narrative's decoding. In this scene, the poet recalls events of December 19, 1783, and of succeeding days. Impatiently waiting on a ridge above Hawkshead for a horse to take him and two of his brothers home for the Christmas holidays, the anxious boy endures the inclement weather, little knowing what is to come:

> One Evening when the wintry blast
> Through the sharp Hawthorn whistling pass'd
> And the poor flocks all pinch'd with cold
> Sad drooping sought the mountain fold[,]
> Long Long upon yon steepy [*naked*] 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.—
>
> (*VE* 274–83)

In a text of repeated descents, where repetition is itself a structural principle and key, the repeating of the word "long" focuses attention on the narrator's anticipation of the horse and on the duration that marks not just death but also the "shock" of loss. The narrative indeed surfaces *because* of this past "bitter shock," a seizing, self-consuming kind of *affect* ("bitter" <OE. *biter,* "biting")[27] that causes the event and its objects to linger, like the "lingering" treasures of the poem's opening lines, and to resurface as haunting intimations, repeated descents, and cryptic, poignant recollections. Moreover, by forming an analogy between being *borne* by a horse and *bearing* the father's "bier" (<OE. *beran,* "to bear"), Wordsworth's text establishes a typology in which being borne prefigures bearing the dead, as a bearing that must itself be borne (i.e., be lamented and recollected). Such a prefigurative paradigm would of course have been familiar to one at all versed in the Anglican liturgy, as was Wordsworth. The landscape of "whistling" and "rustling Boughs" (68), and of other prefigurative and refigurative treasures, takes its allegorical start from this hidden mine of paternal death. Yet, if the poem's melancholy poet is "playing over" some sort of lingering past trauma owed or at least connected to the dead,[28] it might well be asked just what that trauma is and why it appears here to be so strangely significant. In short, what burdensome "treasure," linked to bearing the dead, has been coffered away?

The answer is to be found in subsequent lines of this same passage, where the poet, still lingering over the memory of his father's death, tells how the narrative's tears give his

> soul [*heart*] relief
> To pay the mighty debt of Grief
> With sighs repeated o'er and o'er[;]
> I mourn because I mourn'd no more . . .
> Nor did my little heart foresee
> —She lost a home in losing thee[;]
> Nor did it know—of thee bereft
> That little more than Heav'n was left.
>
> (286–95)

The speaker's remembrance of the events preceding and following the loss of his father elicits tears that "ease" the "mighty debt of Grief" he feels. His

words echo Lord Lyttelton's *Monody*—"I now may give my burden'd heart relief, / And pour forth all my stores of grief" (cited *EPF* 446)—and to some extent Adam Smith's debt analysis of mourning and the ensuing exchange of sympathies.[29] At the same time, however, the narrator's elegiac payment of tribute is in the form of repeated "sighs" paid not because of the dead's troubles, the case in Smith's model, or really even to unburden his heart, as in Lyttleton, but because the poet himself "mourn'd no more."

These lines more closely recall another poem, one important enough to Wordsworth that he later enlisted it as evidence for his claim, in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), that there is "no essential difference between the language of prose and metrical composition" (*LB* 253). The poem, likely read by him at Hawkshead, is Gray's "Sonnet on the Death of Richard West," the closing couplet of which expresses the melancholy lament, "I fruitless mourn to him that cannot hear / And weep the more because I weep in vain."[30] It is easy to see why these lines, singled out in the Preface, remained so memorable for Wordsworth: as with the above lines from the *Vale,* they treat a predicament of mourning "in vain." Yet, however much Gray's poem may be credited as having influenced Wordsworth's lament,[31] there are also pronounced differences between the poems' mourners and their predicaments. As Peter Manning states,

> To read Gray's poem is to experience complete stasis; the paralysis of imagination by grief. . . . Without West to share his burden of grief, Gray is driven back into a solitary death-in-life. . . . Gray's grief feeds on itself and perpetuates its own condition: he weeps the more because he weeps in vain. Gray becomes the tomb of his loss, his immobility the counterpart and representation of West's death.[32]

Gray's grief arises from West's inability to hear his elegist's mourning, creating for the speaker a self-perpetuating cycle of mourning driven by its distance and alienation from its object. His mourning is "fruitless" and "vain" because its loved object cannot perceive its proper actions.

The case is considerably different for Wordsworth's grieving poet, who mourns not because the deceased cannot perceive him but because his mourning is itself insufficient. Either in the *amount* he mourns his dead father ("no more" than he did) or in the *duration* he mourned ("no more" as "o'er," as not "long" enough), there was and is for him a troubling insufficiency in this experience.[33] Thus the ostensibly similar situations for these two mourners could hardly be more different. Although each mourner's mourning is troubled, incessant, and in some manner "vain," for Wordsworth's poet his mourning's troublesome character is marked by insufficiency. That inadequacy is suggested by the semantic ambivalence of "more," a doubling that, like the speaker's second loss of a heart's "home" ("in losing thee"), shifts toward a more overt language

of tropes, in a manner that then links that tropology to a prior, traumatic loss.[34] The poet's repetition of "sighs" emphasizes their materiality, as does his later reference to the overtly poetical "pensive sighs of Gray" (317), an allusion to "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" and its "tribute of a sigh" (l. 80), a phrase that similarly implies debt, with sighs paid as tribute.

That the text enlists a heart's or soul's lost *home* as a metaphor also suggests that holding to a too literal interpretation of these lines—prompted, say, by the fact that Wordsworth did lose a home as a result of his father's death—risks losing sight of the deeper connection between mourning and this Orphic loss "in losing." Indeed, the logical antecedent for the line's oddly non sequitur "Nor" is the directly preceding lament of mourned past mourning. The poet's summation of a trauma that cannot be summed situates the text's enigmas in the metaphorical equating of one type of mourning with another. It does so in a manner analogous to the prior association of horses and biers (both vehicles of conveyance) but with the key difference that it represents the original death-related trauma as lost and unaddressable. Mourning becomes in this sense a privative rather than a restorative signifying mode (to mourn mourning is not the same as to mourn death), the repetition, in Paul de Man's words, "of a previous sign with which it can never coincide, since it is the essence of this previous sign to be pure anteriority."[35] Whether quantitative or qualitative, this "more" is, as the passage's play of meanings suggests, "no more," a fundamental lack. The poem's allegorical narrative leads back, via mediating textualized sighs and repeated ghostly descents, to a problem rooted in the process of mourning itself.

In *Mémoires* Jacques Derrida argues that all such allegories of mourning are written "to the memory of mourning," which is "why there can be no *true* mourning."[36] And, as Derrida elsewhere observes, not only is such mourning "interminable" and "impossible," but, equally importantly, it is also the mourner's "object and . . . resource, working *at mourning*" as one would speak of a painter working *at a painting*."[37] This basic impossibility of the poet's fulfillment of mourning cryptically structures the *Vale*'s coffered narrative, as an interminable debt (and an irretrievable possibility) that enunciates his text's repeated Orphic attempts to mourn. It is not a corpse, then, so much as a missing corpse, and more precisely a missing or lost relationship to the dead, that is coffered away in the poem's ghostly "spot[s]." In this respect the reader may mark a further difference between the poets of Wordsworth's and Gray's elegiac texts. For despite all the *Vale* poet's gothic descents, retreats, and melancholy wanderings, the death he mourns is for him an occasion not for ending or paralysis but for beginning and movement (for poesis, narrative), albeit for recursive beginning and repetitive movement.

This mourning of a prior, foreclosed mourning is touched upon in *The Prelude*'s depiction of this same scene of paternal loss. Wordsworth here recalls how, before having been but ten days

> A Dweller in my Father's House, he died
> And I and my two Brothers, Orphans then,
> Followed his Body to the Grave.
>
> (*13P* 11.366–68)

This passage underlines in a few words the poet's shift in status from a "dweller" not just to a homeless orphan but to a funereal figure following the corpse "to the grave" (were a despondent spouse so described one would assume he or she had "followed" the departed in death). Such death is not literal death—the speaker has lived to write the tale—but a falling or following into an inauthentic relationship between self and (deceased) other.[38] The poet mourns, but like Orpheus he cannot see his lost beloved or feel directly his original loss. Such a counter-logic or "counter-spirit," to borrow Wordsworth's coinage (*PrW* 2: 85), subverts its host-referents, for if to mourn in the first sense (one subsequent to death but prior to narrative) is to grieve death, then to mourn "mourning" is to grieve not the death of a body but the death or deathliness of one's relationship to the dead.

A similar situation exists between the living and dead in Wordsworth's later Fragment of the *Gothic Tale* (1795–96), in which two men descend to a dungeon "where feudal Lords of antient years / The vassals of their will in durance bound" (*B,* ll. 102–3). This gothic descent reveals a subterranean social form of organization associated with binding, prolonged confinement ("durance" points to duration) and "antient" feudal obligation to which the subject "vassal" is bound but, like the *Vale* poet, unable to pay. His is a "durance" that confines and determines him, a debt and duration owed to an unpayable debt. And it is just such a quest for recuperative reconnection that serves in the *Vale* to establish an important promissory relation between the dead and the mournful living. For the interminability of (failed) mourning makes an encrypted poetry of return, revisitation, and recuperation not just possible but also necessary. In this way, the undisclosed, coffered dead linger, haunting the poet and calling him, as his vocation, to follow them to these treasured, secret spots. Desired mourning thereby leads to the basis both for poetic production and for the *Vale*'s nascent imagining of community.

A reading of the most prominent of the *Vale*'s descents, Episode three, helps to expose this mournful foundation of Wordsworth's poesis and sociology. Here the narrator recalls being terrified to find at his hand a "[tall] thin Spectre" who "bore / What seem'd the poet's harp of yore" (219, 226–27). This figure at once led him down a "narrow passage damp and low" to Mount Helvellyn's "inmost womb" (233, 243), where, the speaker tells us, the ghost

> made a solemn stand[,]
> Slow round my head thrice waved his [hand]

And cleaved mine ears then swept his [lyre]
That shriek'd terrific shrill an[d] [dire]
Shudder'd the fiend. The vault a[lo]ng
Echoed the loud and dismal song.
'Twas done. The scene of woe was o'er[;]
My breaking soul could bear no more[.]
[?] when with a thunderous soun[d]
That shook the groaning mountain round
A massy door wide open flew
[?] [   ]
That spirit [   ] my grisly guide
Each night my troubl'd spirit ride[s.]

(244–57)[39]

In this visit to Helvellyn's Underworld it is evident that, as Jonathan Wordsworth claims, "some kind of initiation ceremony is taking place."[40] The poem's poet and his "grisly guide" stand in the "inmost womb" of the mountain, and at the scene's conclusion a "groaning" sound is heard just before a door flies open. The problem of burden bearing represented in Episode four's "little Horse" scene is literalized as ghostly reproduction: a macabre enunciation of one's vocation as a producer of texts representing this haunting subterranean world. To be a poet is here to witness the production of poetry, which is to say to witness one's production as a poet bearing (birthing) a burden of sorrow and woe he cannot bear (carry, tolerate). This "scene of woe" initiates the speaker as a poet by representing to him and through him thereafter the cryptic (re)production of poetry 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),[41] and materialize it in a haunting language of tropes.

As becomes even clearer in subsequent lines, the episode represents poetry's production as stemming from and being owed to a burden of the dead, an unbearable debt beyond the self that is circulated "o'er and o'er" in an economy of loss and desire. The object of the *Vale* poet's initiating song will thereafter be a "Terror shapeless [that] rides" his "soul" as the latter is "hurl'd / Far Far amid the shadowy world," a terror that leaves a haunting legacy of the dead: "And since that hour the world unknown[,] / The world of shades is all my own" (267–71). The terror "rides" the poet's soul as if the latter were a horse or other beast of burden, placing him and his poetic discourse in a position uncannily like the horse of Episode four and like the "bier" that bore his dead father. The poet must bear his burden repeatedly, "Far Far" amid a "shadowy world" not unlike his shadowy burden itself: a "world of shades" that is more a legacy or vehicle ("all my own") than a place. Indeed, in each of the

Vale's gothic episodes the poet discovers and is bequeathed a ghostly source, a "dismal" origin for his burdensome vocation.

Similarly, in the poem's first gothic scene the wandering minstrel, "led astray" in the swamps, hears "Spirits yelling from their pains / And lashes loud and clanking chains" (53–55). Fleeing, like the poet, and startled to hear his harp suddenly "sigh[ing] . . . with hollow groan,"

> He starts the dismal sound to hear
> Nor dares revert his eyes for fear[.]
> Again his harp with thrilling chill
> Shrieks at his shoulder sharp and shrill[;]
> Aghast he views, with eyes of fire
> A grisly Phantom smite the wire.
>
> (58–64)

The vision's beginnings near a mansion's coffer-like "rusted door" (49), and the harp's ghostly "shrieks," connect this episode with those scenes already described. The connection between the episode and its mournful source is underlined by the minstrel's subsequent rousing by

> rustling boughs above
> Or straggl'd sheep with white fleece seen
> Between the Boughs of sombrous green. . . .
>
> (68–70)

The lines intriguingly refigure and repeat the "little Horse" scene's poignant "sharp Hawthorn," through which the wind "whistling pass'd," and the nearby "poor flocks" of sheep. In this way the episode similarly alludes to the father's death and his son's troubled mourning, representing its trauma of "lost" homes and haunted poetic recollections. The poem depicts death, and the distinct problem of mourning it initiates, as an inspiring ghost that haunts the Hamlet-like poet, "smit[ing]" his minstrel's harp with the "dismal sound" of "sighs" and "dismal song[s]," repeating a ghostly poetry. According to Jonathan Wordsworth, "the Spectre of *The Vale of Esthwaite* lives on the other side of the border; he is a ghost, but like Hamlet's father, whom he frequently recalls, he is a troubled one."[42] As in Wordsworth's later Salisbury Plain poems, this first episode presents a poetry haunted and "thrill[ed]" by the dead, and for the very reason that the poet owes to them more than he can give. Such a poetics is the product of a following after the dead, through a "shadowy world" reproduced by a binding that is also a bearing, repeated "Far Far" from the mourning and the dead it seeks. It is a burden whose payment in representation structures the text we read, guiding the poem toward

its social vision of self and other, in which the mourned dead tentatively serve as the foundation for a promissory kind of community.

Episode four contains an important additional detail: the poet's elegiac contemplation of the grave's promise of immortal reunion ("I soon shall be with them that rest" [303]) and of the relationship it effects between mourner and mourned: "Ah pour upon the spot a tear" (323). Following his recollection of paternal loss, the speaker rallies himself with the consolation that he and his father "again shall meet" (297). For, he says, often when

> from afar the midnight bell
> Flings on mine ear its solemn knell[,]
> A still voice whispers to my breast
> I soon shall be with them that rest.
>
> Then, may one [*some*] kind an[d] pious friend
> Assiduous o'er my body bend.
> Once might I see him turn aside
> The kind unwilling tear to hide[,]
> And may—
>
> <div align="right">(300–8)</div>

In this homiletic, consolatory scene the "knell" leads to thoughts of mortality and of the restoration of lost presence. Yet, although this promise is entertained, what dominates the poet's vision of mortality in this section is the churchyard landscape, whose images draw upon lines from Gray's "Elegy." Wordsworth's poet envisions his friend bending over his grave in "pious" acts observed by the dead. The scene readily calls to mind one of Dorothy Wordsworth's later journal entries, describing how in a trench in John's Grove she and William

> lay still, and unseen by one another; he thought that it would be as sweet thus to lie so in the grave, to hear the *peaceful* sounds of the earth, and just to know that our dear friends were near.[43]

Sister and brother envision the grave as a site where the dead remain engaged in viewing mourners' acts of remembrance. In the *Vale* the poet's consoling thought that he will see his friend bend over his grave suggests a similar living-on, in which the deceased, bound to a grave and locale, exists as a resting body and a surviving surveillant mind (the implication is that to "be with them that rest" is to find both "sleep" *and* waking while in "peace beneath a green grass heap" [315]). The dead are in topographical and spiritual proximity to the living, not just as corpses but as listening, seeing, potentially demanding presences haunting the living with their hopes and desires for tribute.

Rather like in "We are Seven," the churchyard in the *Vale* integrates these consecrated "heap[s]" of the surveying dead into a social topography of children, friends, and family:

> What from the social chain can tear
> This bosom link'd for ever there
> Which feels where'er the hand of pain
> Touches this heav'n connected chain[,]
> Feels quick as thought the electric thrill
> Feels it ah me—and shudders still.
> While bounteous Heav'n shall Fleming leave
> Of Friendship [what] can me bereave[?]
>
> (388–95)

Landon and Curtis find no literary source for Wordsworth's image of this "electric" social chain, but ponder that the detail might bear some relation to the theory of the Great Chain of Being, "while signifying more specifically the 'social chain' linking man to man and especially, in this context, friend to friend" (*EPF* 454). They also rightly remark Dorothy's quotation of this line in a letter to Jane Pollard, in which she comments that "[n]either absence nor Distance nor Time can ever break the Chain that links me to my Brothers" (*EY* 88). In the *Vale,* death exposes a still wider "heav'n connected chain" binding together the living and the dead—a chain depicted in a subsequent extract as "world encircling." That "social chain" is described in terms that recall Episode one's "thrilling chill" of the Phantom's "smit[ing]" of the minstrel's harp, Episode two's "icy chain," and Episode three's "shrill" and "dire" sounds from the Spectre's "lyre." These *thrills* of death reveal to the poet the bond's existence as well as the mutability of the links of its chain. The reader is informed, moreover, that "loitering" children may impiously "disturb the holy ground" in the churchyard, violating the graves' sod with their footsteps (318–21) and thereby repeating, in displaced form, the poet's own lack of sufficient paternal reverence, while also making needed just such acts of pious caretaking.

This churchyard topography blends together the impious young's uninhibited play among the dead and the pious elders' commemoration of these same dead, making the intercessions of the friend necessary and, so long as the young remain forgetfully impious, in need of repeating. That the recollected or imagined dead are retrospectively or prospectively envisioned as desiring remembrance would seem in itself to attest to the insufficiency of their "rest" and to their need for supplementary intercessions. No wonder, then, that a mourner might feel their presence as expectant onlookers. The churchyard establishes or emblematizes this connection between the living and dead but

also implies the lingering pains of such relationship, rising from loss and mediation, from thwarted desires, and from feelings of insufficiency regarding mourning and remembrance. Such lasting connection between the living and the mourned dead, and among the living themselves, finds in the churchyard its locale for a chain that binds the dead to the living and, potentially—and in the *Vale* only implicitly—the living to one another as indebted mourners. They mourn, owing their mourning as quasi-suffrages to the dead, who may or may not survey them but whose loss is felt, grieved over, and imparted all the same. Death and its dead create a desire for grief: not just for one's own (poetry is in a sense that already) but for another's, as well as for the other's grief for oneself. The *Vale* poet seeks an elegiac and communitarian "social chain" of mournful others and of "lingering look[s]" (359), his poem in this way envisioning a lineage of survivors recurrently tied to loss and to that loss's "world of shades."

Nevertheless, *The Vale of Esthwaite* hardly seems to end on an optimistic communitarian note, for its conclusion returns the poet to a subterranean, crypt-like place:

> And that full soon must I resign
> To delve in Mammon's joyless mine[.]
>
> Your hollow echoes only moan
> To toil's loud din or sorrow's groan[.]
>
>   (AP V, 13–16)

The biographical event described is Wordsworth's imminent departure for Cambridge, and in particular his rejection of advice from his relations to concentrate on more practical matters than poetry (chiefly the law), substituting Mammon for art. But in terms of the poem's thematics, the speaker's "resign[ed]" descent to a "joyless mine" signals the narrative's return to the grief of its previous subterranean allegories. As the Miltonic allusion to the devil Mammon suggests, this last descent advances the prospect of mining such veins of gold to forge an infernal society of the dead.[44] And, to judge from the *Vale* poet's experience, the hidden coffered ore of such society, both of its foundations and of its social bonds, is grief: the lingering, interminable character of "Sweet Melancholy blind / The moonlight of the Poet's mind" (5–6).

In *Home at Grasmere* Wordsworth likens his poetic investigation "into the mind of Man" to a descent into "The darkest Pit / Of the profoundest Hell" (*HG*, MS. B, ll. 989, 984–85). The analogy is apposite, for it implies that the prerequisite for his poetics—its "haunt" (990) and what it is haunted by—is an Orphic *katabasis* to recover a "living [Elysian] home" crafted by the "delicate spirits" of the dead (991–97). To be a poet is to descend or to desire to

descend into the grave. Yet, at the same time, neither *Home at Grasmere* nor *The Vale of Esthwaite* reduces death merely to a problem of language as "prison-house"; nor does the *Vale* reduce its mourning only to a "linguistic predicament" of difference or indeterminacy underlying some mystified poetics of retrieval.[45] For the *Vale*'s foundations of poesis are rooted in mourning the dead, requiring not just death but an experience of loss that is not reducible to language and mediation. Figuration accentuates and perpetuates such originary loss, as an echo that is never quite the thing itself nor ever just an echo. It is a mournful economy that makes poems not just possible but necessary, as the products of a burden neither silently nor singly to be borne.

Although the poet figure of the *Vale* nonetheless remains to some extent isolated and confused about his status, the poems Wordsworth composes over the next few years will come closer to imagining a "spiritual community" structured between "the living and the dead." As subsequent chapters show, mournful narrative increasingly becomes a meeting place of sorts, where tributes of grief are exchanged as the currency of community. At Cambridge, Wordsworth will especially begin to envision the ways in which an "awful grief" can proffer salutary "social rays." By the time of his graduation and departure, the poet's implicit paradigm of community will nearly be complete.