

Violence and Absence

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Abstract

In several poems, Wordsworth considers the active representation of absence-- a stone circle, a zero, an "O the difference to me!"-- as a response to violence. Absent histories create our own involuntary misreadings, well-rehearsed in New Historicist debates surrounding *Tintern Abbey*, and *Three Years She Grew*, but present absences can heighten the descriptive violence as in a Hitchcock film where one only hears the scream as a camera cuts away, or as in Wordsworth's lesser-known *Alice Fell*, wherein the violence reeked upon a girl is displaced onto surrounding objects making it at once more palatable and more subversive. This paper's method is to consider Ovid, Wordsworth's favorite poet as a young man, as a likely template for this trope. I show that certain of Wordsworth's poems emerged as exercises in Ovidian imitation, and that he's used the erasure of this poetic father to add darkness and suggestion to poems which are often misread as innocent.

If I could tell you, I would let you know..."

-W.H.Auden

Longtime readers of Wordsworth are somewhat used to disappointment. First, he appears to be the great poet of the revolution, "a lone star, whose light did shine/ On some frail bark in winter's midnight roar," weaving "songs consecrate to truth and liberty" as Shelley has it in "To Wordsworth" who fails in that capacity, eventually joining the government he'd railed against, prompting the younger poet to label him a "deserter," and to count him, though still very much living, among the dead (7-8;11).

Then, he spends his career hyping a long poem, his masterwork, and manages to produce only a very promising prelude. “We know,” writes Thomas Vogler, “however painful it is to admit, that ‘The Excursion’ does not fulfill the anticipations of the preparatory poem, either in quality or in the nature of vision” (17).

And then there is all this business about the abbey. It’s true that what one notices upon visiting the ruins of Tintern Abbey is what isn’t there. The lack of a roof, windows, and internal divisions opens up the cathedral to the sky; it feels like a frame without a picture. It feels like one is standing out in the open, though s/he is circumscribed by the ring of the walls. It feels like what structure survives exists only to emphasize the absence.

The absence in this case has a violent past, as New Historicist readings have rightly noted. Tintern Abbey was surrendered to the King’s Visitors on 3 September 1536, who proceeded to take everything that could be carried and burn everything that could not. Thereafter, it became a place for England’s poor to gather and plan political action, or to stay warm. And when Wordsworth visits, he mentions none of this. He looks away. One doesn’t have to *mention* the political implications of a site in order to suggest them; even to ignore them is to say something, since the reporter has obviously avoided them consciously.

Or is it so obvious? Much has been made of Wordsworth’s supposed evasion of Tintern Abbey’s history in studies of Romanticism. Jerome McGann writes of the poem in *The Romantic Ideology*:

In the course of the poem not a word is said about the French Revolution, or about the impoverished and dislocated country poor. ... [Tintern Abbey’s] method is to replace an image and landscape of contradiction with one dominated by 'the power/Of harmony. (85-86)

James Chandler suggests that what's strange about Wordsworth's failure to mention the Abbey's history is that 1793 "marks the center of Wordsworth's revolutionary phase" and yet "the poem makes no mention of political affairs" (9). Marjorie Levinson asks the question directly, without posing an answer: "why would a writer call attention to a famous ruin and then studiously ignore it" (15)?

They have been answered severally, by Alan Rawes in "Romantic Form and New Historicism," which recounts the academic discussion hereon, and by Kim Sung-Joong who relates Levinson's anecdote about how obvious is the problem of Wordsworth's practical avoidance of history in *Tintern Abbey*, and offers an answer:

her undergraduate students wondered why 'in a poem commonly known as *Tintern Abbey* and, by its title, very concretely situated with respect to time and place of composition, there is no mention of an abbey'. While Levinson turns her doubt to the poet's integrity, my response to the students would be that if *Lines Written At a Small Distance From My House* is called by *My House* for convenience's sake, they should not expect that the poem should be about a house because it is actually about nature. This is also the case with *Lines Written A Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey*. (470)

We should also note that Wordsworth *does* mention the rural poor surrounding the abbey, by introducing "vagrant dwellers in the houseless woods" (*line* 21). In addition to all this, the poem is about *memory*...of course we are meant to recall the ruins of the abbey, and the whole history of that area. It's not as though the poem is purely imagistic, or narrative. It discourses on memory and sets that discourse in a place pregnant with them.

But then, Wordsworth has a habit of not mentioning the things we readers would sometimes like him to have done. He was in Orleans, France on 21 September 1792 when Henri

Gregoire proposed the abolition of the monarchy to the National Convention, and was present during what would become known as the “September Massacres,” yet his only significant poem of the period is *Evening Walk*, describing his explorations of the banks of the Loire (Barker 75). His biographer, Juliet Barker, writes “French historians are not alone in bemoaning William’s infuriating failure to record life in Orleans at such a momentous time, to which one might add the equally maddening silence on Annette” (75).

Wordsworth continues the pattern of evasion throughout his career: from his missing the summit of the Alps, to a later poem, discussed at length in this chapter, wherein the poet describes a druidic stone-circle without mentioning the druids.

So why does he displace its representation? I think his inability to look at certain types of images comes through a strange patron, whose practice of not looking in order to heighten representational violence holds all the way to Hitchcock and beyond.

Ovid had to be careful anyway. Toeing (unsuccessfully it turned out) the line between pleasing his patron and writing the histories of the holiest of gods, he writes a book full of rapes and murder, but knows, if only as a poet, that there are some scenes best left un-described, whose horror would be heightened by a lack of direct gaze.

This article is concerned with representational absence in response to violence, beginning with Ovid’s sublimated descriptions of sexual transgression, continuing to Wordsworth’s appropriation of Ovidian myth-structures, especially in *Alice Fell* and the Lucy poems, and closing with Wordsworth’s continued representation of absent centers in both personal anecdotes and later poems like *Long Meg and Her Daughters*.

Apollo’s Open Arms

In *The Metamorphoses*, readers are introduced Apollo through the story of his conquest of Daphne, wherein the young god falls in love, and in short order, pursues the shepherdess.

So ran the god and girl, one swift in hope,
The other in terror, but he ran more swiftly,
Borne on wings of love, gave her no rest. (l. 1.537-539)

Soon, she is exhausted, and prays “if there is any power in the rivers/ Change and destroy the body which has given/ too much delight.” At once the poem goes on to describe how “her soft breasts/ were closed with delicate bark, her hair was leaves, her arms were branches, and her speedy feet/ rooted and held” (l. 1.549-550). She has become a tree, and the young god is left stupefied, standing “with many words unsaid” (19).

When Apollo wraps his arms to gather his beloved, he gets nothing. Where he expected a warm girl, he has, due to a supra-divine intervention, got instead only air. Dismayed, he sits under the tree she has become for awhile and then, reports Ovid,

he placed his hand
where he had hoped and felt the heart still beating
Under the bark; and he embraced the branches
As if they were limbs, and kissed the wood,
And the wood shrank from his kisses, and the god
Exclaimed: “Since you can never be my bride,
My tree at least you shall be! Let the laurel
Adorn, henceforth, my hair, my lyre, my quiver. (l. 1.553-560)

Having failed to violate the girl, the young Apollo instead violates the tree that is her refuge. That symbol of the ring of his arms encircling an absence gets echoed in the shape of the laurel wreath he makes instead. Since he takes the laurel branch from the tree that Daphne

became, it is for him a consolation prize, and henceforward, since Apollo is the god of poetry, and since the laurel is the poet's crown, poetry is connected to notions of consolation and secondary lights.

And so, when he writes the rape of Proserpina, though her ravager is Hades himself, Ovid shows us almost nothing. For a description of a rape scene, and all the emotion that must be present in such an encounter, the detail is notably sparse.

So, in one moment,

Or almost one, she was seen, loved, and taken

In Pluto's rush of Love (l. 5.394-396)

The closest thing we get to a detail is told in past tense; the event is over: "Where he had torn the garment from her shoulder, the loosened flowers fell, and she, poor darling, in simple innocence, grieved as much for them as for her loss." That distance softens the blow somewhat, as does the editorial interjection. "In simple innocence" creates a character who is telling this story, and we are whisked away from the violence as quickly as possible.

But the description of those flowers falling *is part of* the rape scene. They are described no more vividly than the climax, but they are doing some work in the story, if only the work of absence. Proserpina's mother is Ceres, who is also called "Hymen," and so the fact that flowers are falling suggests the girl's own deflowering is being told by proxy.

Still, there seems a willful avoidance to deal with the aggression directly, which is not always the case. Ovid can describe other things vividly. In the story of Caunus and Byblis, for example, he describes a girl who is crying (importantly not in response to immediate violence) in hyper-real clarity:

As the cut bark

Oozes its pitchy drops, or as ice trickles

To melting in the warm west wind and sunshine,
 So Byblis in her tears became a fountain. (l. 9.660-664)

One wonders then if the displacement we see in the Proserpina story isn't Ovid's way of getting around the issue. If he describes everything around the rape in hyper-real clarity, he can suggest the details of the encounter without doing it directly.

The horses the Pluto drives, for example, sound like what they are: beasts from the pit of hell. "Her ravager," the poet writes, almost with relish, "drove the car fiercely on, shook up the horses...the reigns, dark-dyed, sawing the necks and manes." This blackness, this urgency, this brutality is what Ovid meant to suggest in the episode immediately previous, but--because that scene's actual violence is too palpable--he displaces it onto the nearest other living object.

Which leaves us to re-create our sympathy for Proserpina through the sympathy we're feeling for his team. A young girl has just been raped and dragged to hell, and we're left thinking about *those poor horses*. It's a remarkable poetic device.

Another, yet more visceral example of Ovid's displacement in this same episode comes from the description of the what happens to the ground as Pluto's chariot enters it.

Burning with terrible anger, [the god] whipped the horses,
 Whirled, with his strong right arm, the royal sceptre,
 Smote the pool open to its very depths,
 And the earth opened, and the chariot plunged
 Through the new crater down to Hell. (l. 5.424-428)

It should be clear from what I've just argued that Ovid means to suggest more by describing Pluto's "strong right arm" than meets the proverbial eye. He's given the violence that was reeked upon Proserpina's body to the earth around her. When we hear about "the royal sceptre" smiting "the pool open to its very depths," we cringe, not because we're concerned

about the water, but because, if we've been paying attention, we know that it is Proserpina herself who's been smitten.

Triton's Wreathed Horn

"Great God! I'd rather be a Pagan," Wordsworth writes in what is perhaps his best-known sonnet,

suckled in a creed outworn;
So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;
Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;
Or hear old Triton blow his wreathed horn! (l. 10-14)

I asked in class one time who Triton was, from Wordsworth's great poem, and was answered that it doesn't really matter to the poem; it's only that Wordsworth longs for a more glorious past to revitalize his present. It's a good answer, consistent with a general reading of his poetry, and satisfying enough at the time, but reading through Ovid answers the question more completely and the answer has important implications for the poem and for this study.

The story of Triton is recorded in The Metamorphoses in terms which Wordsworth's sonnet recall.

From down under, with his shoulders
Barnacle-strewn, loomed above the waters,
the blue green sea god, whose resounding horn
Is heard from shore to shore. Wet-bearded, Triton
set lip to that great shell, as Neptune ordered,

sounding retreat, and all the lands and waters
 heard and obeyed...the world returns (l. 1.243-252)

Wordsworth's "world" which is "too much with us" is, as usually interpreted, the Britain of the agricultural revolution, but is also, ironically, and un-world. It is the water-covered world of Ovid's flood and man's "getting and spending" fills and kills everything just like that water did.

This is why the poet suddenly says "the sea that bares her bosom to the moon;" we hadn't known him to be standing on a seashore up to this point. Still, we don't have to envision him as a solitary wanderer facing an untamable sea vis-à-vis Caspar David Friedrich. "This sea" is a metaphorical one: the sea all around us is, in Wordsworth's poem, the sea of Ovid's flood.

The poem continues with, "the winds that will be howling," giving us the second of only two natural phenomena in the poem: the sea and the wind. The section in Ovid containing the Triton tale is actually from the story of *Deucalion and Pyrrha*, itself immediately following the story called *The Flood*. In that tale, the creation of the world is envisioned as an action of these same natural phenomena: the sea and the wind.

The North-wind, and the West-wind, and such others
 As ever banish cloud, and he turned loose
 The South-wind, and the South-wind came streaming
 With dripping wings. (l. 1.169-172)

When Triton blows his horn after water covered the earth again, he is re-creating the world that had just been created in the previous chapter, hence the poem's ending: "the world *returns*" (13).

Wordsworth's wish then, his prescription, is at once a desire for a return to the world--that the natural world will return to our sensibilities as dry land after being at sea--and that, in hearing

Triton blow his wreathed horn, the world will be created again, in his poem. To hear that horn is to hear the world-making sound of poetry.

With this reading, I mean to demonstrate how reading Ovid can backlight and fill our interpretation of Wordsworth's poetry. Without that background, much of this poem is closed to us. Keeping Ovid in mind, however, other curiosities of the poem become clearer.

The diction, for example, which is otherwise cumbersome focuses: "the winds that will be howling at all hours and are up! Gathered now like sleeping flowers." What does it mean for the winds to be "up?" If we envision the poem's taking place between these two Ovidian myths, the answer is obvious. What sort of hand could reach *down* to gather the winds, pulling them "up" as a wanderer who gathers flowers? A god's hand. It is no act of unmediated nature; rather, this is an involved act on the part of a pagan godⁱ.

Midway through the sonnet, the narrator calls out "Great God!" claiming he'd rather be a pagan. Rather than what? Since the pagan creed is described as "outworn," we can assume that the narrator has been suckled in a living or still-applicable creed, which for an Englishman of the 18th century is the Christian.

For this exclamation, there are two interpretive options. Either "Great God!" is a curse-word, immediately after which the narrator returns the prophetic/solitary voice of the beginning, or the entire poem following line 9 is a prayer to that "Great God." If the latter, it may well be that the Christian world is one of the many that are "too much with us." How then can the narrator revitalize his present? The answer cannot be religious, since he offends one creedⁱⁱ, and describes the other as "outworn"ⁱⁱⁱ.

The poet inherits the mandate of world-making then, but what sort of world? The narrator doesn't only long for a past to revive, but for the specifically classical past of ancient Greece and

Rome. The world he wants to re-make, the flood to uncover, is significantly not the one of Noah's flood, but of Ovid's.

In "The Dialogue on Poetry and Literary Aphorisms," Friedrich Schlegel outlines this Romantic impulse toward Hellenism and world-making:

I will go right to the point. Our poetry, I maintain, lacks a focal point, such as mythology was for the ancients; and one could summarize all the essentials in which modern poetry is inferior to the ancients with these words: we have no mythology. But I add, we are close to obtaining one, or, rather, it is time that we earnestly work together to create one. (81)

It has been called a central project for the Romantic poets, both British and Continental, to find ways of reusing or reviving classical myths. Harold Bloom^{iv} argues that this was not only an ambition, but a necessary step to the success of their own verse. This mandate for the modern artist^v was articulated as early as Winckelmann, whose dictum, "there is but one way for the moderns to become great, and perhaps unequalled; I mean, by imitating the ancients" amounted to a kind of Platonic banishment of the poets to which all later theorists must respond (61). One such scholar, David Ferris, argues that an imitation is impossible.

The necessity of this path is clearly dictated by the inimitability of a Greece whose achievement is so complete, nothing can be added to it. Since nothing can be added, Greece can be said to have attained the most perfect representation of itself: Greece is now completely embodied by its representation. (32)

This impossibility does not, however, leave the Romantic poet without hope. Ferris continues,

Modernity, in effect, seeks to affirm the necessity of its existence, and this necessity is discovered in the impossible example of Greece. This impossibility is expressed both by the inimitability of Greece and the paradoxical demand that

such inimitability be imitated. Faced with such a demand, modernity has no choice but to produce its own history.

Indeed, Continental Romantics like Schlegel and Wilhem Von Humboldt were implying such a resolve^{vi} in their own time. Humboldt writes of the ancients, “but their greatness is so pure and true, its origins so genuinely rooted in nature and humanity that they move us, not with compulsion to be more like them, but with inspiration to be more like ourselves” (81).

If ancient poetry must be imitated to gain greatness, as Winckelmann asserts, and if it is inherently inimitable (and was for the Romantics) as Ferris claims, what options? One possible Romantic response to this paradoxical mandate is to do what they did: Greece represents *itself*, embodies itself in representation. England must therefore represent not Greece, but herself, which is what Wordsworth set out to do in Lyrical Ballads and in later work. Indeed, it is possible to read Wordsworth’s entire career as a response to this mandate: a re-creation of the Greek mythological/artistic system in British form.

For now, let us content ourselves with seeing how this response works in a second poem. We’ve seen one way Wordsworth answers this call, in “The World is Too Much With Us:” by setting up a verse narrative in which a figure like himself encounters nature and (in this case) literally calls out for the classical past: “Great God! I’d rather be a pagan...” Here I’d like to suggest another of Wordsworth’s methods for re-creating the ancient myths in his poetry.

Alice Fell’s Fall

The copy of Wordsworth that I read^{vii} is from the Bromley School for Girls, 1911 edition. I mention it as a ‘note on the text’ and for one other reason: many such editions have appeared and, if I find it endearing, I also find it a bit troubling. I contend that a literary collective nostalgia

for the golden days of the British countryside and its poetry has colored public perception of Wordsworth's poetry in a way that emasculates it, making tame and even patriotic, a *corpus* that is dangerous and that, at times, borders on the obscene. Reading Wordsworth alongside Ovid refreshes the myths on which he draws and restores some of their violence.

In Wordsworth's "Alice Fell," a young girl is picked up and cries for the cloak that has been torn in the wheel of the carriage in which the narrator has offered her a ride.

"My cloak!" no other word she spake,
 But loud and bitterly she wept,
 As if her innocent heart would break;
 And down from off her seat she leapt.
 "What ails you, child?"--she sobbed "Look here!"
 I saw it in the wheel entangled,
 A weather-beaten rag as e'er
 From any garden scare-crow dangled.
 There, twisted between nave and spoke,
 It hung, nor could at once be freed;
 But our joint pains unloosed the cloak,
 A miserable rag indeed! (l. 21-31)

Upon seeing her tears, the Wordsworth/*flâneur* is touched by her simplicity and gives her money for a new cloak before driving off. Critics^{viii} have suggested that the Wordsworthian wanderer never really helps any of the figures he encounters and prefers to showcase their plight, as here, in his argument for a return to simpler times: his own brand of Romantic nostalgia.

I told my teacher, the late Dr. Bryan Short^{ix}, that I would be giving a copy of Richardson's Pamela to all of the young girls I knew, nieces and godchildren especially. He said,

“you should give it to the boys, too, so they can find out who to watch out for—these manipulating authors and their seemingly innocent characters.” The editor of the art journal, *Image*, writes, in an essay discussing sentimental art^x,

Sentimentality...can be harmless. A penchant for Hallmark cards and posters of kittens playing with balls of yarn is not in itself a mortal sin. But when the misrepresentation of the world takes on a particular consistency and brittleness, darker consequences are possible. (146)

In Ovid, Proserpina is gathering flowers (as do many of Wordsworth’s young maids) when she is abducted by Pluto.

Where he had torn the garment from her shoulder,
The loosened flowers fell, and she, poor darling,
In simple innocence, grieved as much for them
As for her loss. (l. 5.397-400)

This loss to which the story refers is, of course, her virginity; Pluto goes on to rape her. I’m suggesting that Alice is Wordsworth’s version of Persephone myth.

The similarities are many, and mostly structural. Wordsworth’s version begins with a carriage that is being driven “with fierce career/ For threatening clouds the moon had drowned...,” and Ovid’s, “her ravager drove the car fiercely on.” Each poem continues to use the phrase “simple innocence” and “the garment torn,” verbatim^{xi}.

Both concern girls who are themselves over-concerned with their cloaks, which becomes the center of the story, in each case. In Ovid, the cloak is what reminds Ceres that Proserpina has been taken and causes the blight of Sicily. Similarly, Wordsworth has nearly all the action surrounding Alice’s cloak: its loss, grieving, explanation, and replacement. Both girls are then taken up in the chariots by powerful men, riding behind teams of horses, and both are,

importantly, shown in their grief to misunderstand their true loss. In Proserpina's case it is her virginity, and in Alice's (on a literal level) her dead parents.

My name is Alice Fell;
 I'm fatherless and motherless.
 And I to Durham, Sir, belong.
 Again, as if the thought would choke
 Her very heart, her grief grew strong
 And all was for her tattered cloak! (l. 45-50)

Alice is both an orphan and a street-dweller who only cries for her "torn cloak," while her counterpart, Proserpina, has been taken from the world completely, to dwell in Hades: she cries only for her dropped flowers.

Reading "Alice Fell" which these allusions intact also makes better sense of the title. "Fell" acts as a verb here, which strengthens the suggestion *via* fallen-ness as sexual transgression; Alice fell from innocence.

We can also see how, if she is the counterpart to Proserpina, she *fell* directionally, since Hades is down, beneath the known world. Ovid uses the directionality in this case as another sexual image, a way of describing the rape without describing it directly. This one is a picture of Pluto's chariot itself as it plunges and "[earth] opened willingly to that ravishment."

In the same vein, the rape (of Alice) is implied in the tearing of the cloak/hymen just as it is represented imagistically in Ovid by the peeled pomegranate, "with the inside coating of the pale rind showing." Wordsworth's retelling doesn't focus on the rape anymore than does Ovid. Rather it retells the whole story *around* it, as a way of "gentling the daemonic," as Wieskel has it.

The technique is a way of letting the unsaid do the dark work. Richard Rorty gives us terms for such a theory, describing "the way in which the accidental, or incidental features of the

text can be seen as betraying, or subverting, its purportedly essential message” (qtd Weinberg 49). Wordsworth’s straight story says he only met her, gave her a ride, and then gave her money, but the story’s recognizable structure suggests that our discomfort with lines like “then come with me into the chaise,” may be warranted.

My contention is not that Wordsworth was a child molester, but that he was an Ovidian. He knew this version of the “Rape of Proserpina,” and others from Ovid and used them to add darkness and suggestion to poems which would otherwise sound trite^{xii}.

Strangely, he knew Ovid before Virgil, the former’s having apparently been standard instruction at Hawkshead Grammar School, according to Duncan Wu (109). According to the poet himself, he preferred Ovid as well, describing how he was “quite in a passion whenever I found him, in books of criticism, placed below Virgil” (Cornell *Poems 1807-1820* 544). He’d read *Metamorphosis* in the original, in both the Bailey^{xiii} and Sandy^{xiv} translations, and was given new copies of the collection by friends who knew him well.

Critics then, may be right to detect a note of malice in Wordsworth’s *flaneur*. What I’m interested in here is how Wordsworth’s poem builds an undertone, a suggestion of terror--that he may have been interested in these figures (Alice, Margaret, Lucy) for more than sociological reasons--while remaining the poet of innocence.

Biographical criticism has it that Wordsworth heard the story from a friend, to whom the incident happened and was encouraged to turn it into a poem^{xv}, so we should do something with this less-compelling explanation^{xvi}. The possibilities for excusing our reading from it are many, and all pure speculation, my favorite of which are either that these classical myth structures had by this point worked their way so deeply into Wordsworth’s imagination that the text could have been (as Rorty suggests) subverting itself unknowingly, or that he did hear this story from Mr.

Graham, but he told it this way as a joke, knowing what a fan of Ovid he was, and wondering whether he'd catch the implication.

Of course, the trope of the overheard story is a classic tool of Romantic poetry. "I met a traveler from an antique land who said..." begins Shelley's "Ozymandias," which continues to recount an alleged overheard observance. As another example, the whole of Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" claims to be mere *reportage* from the wild imaginings of a wedding guest. Many works of Romantic imagination, from Ossian onwards, take a similar form.

One other option is also based in biography. Wordsworth was an outspoken reader of Ovid throughout his life, "expressing an early independence by preferring Ovid over Virgil" (52). Biographer Kenneth Johnston writes, in *The Hidden Wordsworth*, that not only did he read and admire Ovid, but he had began writing imitations of him as a schoolboy under the tutorship of William Taylor, who "set his young charges to imitate not only the best classical models but also a wide range of contemporary ones" (52). It is entirely possible then that consciously or otherwise, "Alice Fell" emerged as a kind of schoolbook exercise in Ovidian imitation at which he was practiced and which he reportedly enjoyed.

There's one further implication of this reading I'd like to point out. If Alice is Proserpina, and the *flaneur* is Pluto, who plays Ceres, the third character in Ovid? The role is split two ways. Ceres is the agent who rescues Proserpina back from Hades, making her innocent again, and regenerating the world thereby. This part of Ceres is played by the Wordsworth/*flaneur*, who buys a new cloak for Alice, and in so doing, turns her from "Half-wild," and from broken innocence ("as though her innocent heart would break"), "insensible to all relief," into a "proud creature." That this transformation happens through the repaired cloak is exactly in keeping with the Ceres myth. If the cloak represents hymen, (as do the ground, the pomegranate, the cloak,

and the flowers in Ovid) then Ceres, in restoring her to innocence --in making Spring come, and thereby regenerating the broken flowers—restores her torn cloak as well, imagistically.

The second half of Ceres is played by Wordsworth the poet. We recall that the whole Proserpina tale is being told by Ceres as a lament, and so she is both character and author. Here is a role Wordsworth would have relished. In it, he becomes, as a poet, Ceres the repairer of innocence, making spring over and over again in these poems. As teller of the tale, he has stitched innocence back into the thing, which may be one reason he left the violence inexplicit. The poet as world-maker becomes Ceres the Weaver, who by sealing up the gash --in the earth, in the cloak—cyclically uncovers the world of its water.

The Stone Circle

Exactly 31 years^{xvii} after his visit to Tintern Abbey, Wordsworth set out on a tour of remote northern islands that became a sequence of poems “Composed or suggested During a Tour in the Summer of 1833.” This title is another of Wordsworth’s usual compositional fictions, as argued by Tim Fulford, who points out that, though it was included in the second edition of that volume, the poem “Long Meg” was actually published earlier in the 1822 Description of the Scenery of the Lakes in the North of England, and was even included in the 1827 Collected Poems (39).

Fulford goes on to argue in *Long Meg and the Later Wordsworth*, that, in the area’s folklore, Long Meg--a stone circle on the order of Stonehenge, but a bit smaller-- “hints at monstrosity and magic,” explaining how

One [folktale] said that Long Meg was a witch who with her daughters was turned to stone for violating the Sabbath as they danced wildly around the moor. Another

suggested that, were Long Meg to be shattered, it would run with blood. It seems that, in oral tradition the stones were, rather than a holy family, the frozen embodiments of a witches' coven--a sacrificial rite metamorphosed or a transgressive dance petrified.

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Something about the movement of those daughters suggests for me Robert Frost's poem, *The Secret Sits*, which reads, in its entirety,

We dance round in a ring and suppose,
But the Secret sits in the middle and knows.

This poem suggests two ideas important for a reading of Wordsworth, and for the absence he outlines by swerving around some structural center. One, that the closest anyone can get to the center, to mystery, to real knowledge is to dance around in a circular fashion, often missing the point.

This should not be taken as a lament for the insufficiency of human knowledge, but can instead be read as an artistic prescription; if you want to capture something as it is, don't go directly after it, but define it by dancing around it, hedging it in, or, as Coleridge did according to my argument in *The Prison Bower of Meaning*, render it as a negative quantity.

The second idea that is suggested by Frost's poem reinforces the first: if one finds himself at the center somehow, it will be impossible to speak out. This may not seem to follow immediately, but the language of the poem implies it because, rather than "suppose," as the secret does--that is, rather than conjecture, posit, philosophize, and render artistically, the center/subject ("the secret," in this formation) only *knows*. Whatever certainty the subject might enjoy at that moment must be its own reward, because "knowing" is not the same as "telling."

This is why Keats has Cortez “silent upon the peaks of Darien.” If he could speak from it, he wouldn’t be on the peak; the poet’s options are to report from the edge of the circle, or to stand in the center and be silent. It is also why T.S. Eliot chose as the epigraph for *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, these lines from Dante:

S'io credesse che mia risposta fosse
A persona che mai tornasse al mondo,
Questa fiamma staria senza piu scosse.
Ma per cio che giammai di questo fondo
Non torno vivo alcun, s'i'odo il vero,
Senza tema d'infamia ti rispondo^{xviii}.

These are the two options: either the artist can flail about like Long Meg’s daughters, can build domes in the air like Kubla Khan, or he can progress, or descend to where all is clear, but with the caveat that from that point, words won’t carry. If, finally, she “knows,” the artist can’t tell anyone.

William Hazlitt has a similar reaction to the same circle of stones. He refers to the monument as “that huge, dumb heap, that stands on the blasted heath, and looks like a group of giants, bewildered, not knowing what to do, encumbering the earth, and turned to stone, while in the act of warring with heaven” (56). His reading is, not surprisingly, *literary*; that is, it is filtered through Milton, but what he emphasizes about the circle is the same thing that Wordsworth emphasizes: the great silence that the stones both live in, and create.

The theme comes up over and over again: the stunned silence at the moment of acute perception and the re-entry of logic, and speech, following a period of recovery. Wordsworth’s famous crossing of Simplon Pass in book VI of the 1805 *Prelude* is representative of the move because of its lack of such a point. Safely grounded, Wordsworth reports,

By fortunate chance,
 While every moment now encreased our doubts,
 A peasant met us, and from him we learned
 That to the place which had perplexed us first
 We must descend, and there should find the road
 Which in the stony channel of the stream
 Lay a few steps, and then along its banks—
 And further, that thenceforward all our course
 Was downwards with the current of that stream.
 Hard of belief, we questioned him again,
 And all the answers which the man returned
 To our inquiries, in their sense and substance
 Translated by the feelings which we had,
 Ended in this—that we had crossed the Alps. (l. 5.577-591)

Often the anecdote is told amusingly: *Silly Wordsworth, climbing all that way and missing what he came for!* But anyone who has done much hiking will recognize the experience. Mountains often refuse to culminate in a convenient peak. One usually wanders around asking “Is this it? Are we there?” as the terrain rises and falls and meanders.

In fact, Wordsworth’s description demonstrates the veracity of his tour because of this recognizability. If he had bounded up and said “O, what vistas!” we could take the story for a convenient Romantic fiction; that he couldn’t tell when he’d arrived suggests a real experience. This failure of representation of a literal mountaintop experience gets echoed in descriptions of other, usually metaphorical high points in the poetic *oeuvre*.

The poet recognizes that failure of representation, which is why he leaps immediately from the scene described to a meditation on the imagination. The poem shifts hard:

Imagination!—lifting up itself
Before the eye and progress of my song
Like an unfathered vapour, here that power,
In all the might of its endowments, came
Athwart me. I was lost as in a cloud,
Halted without a struggle to break through,
And now, recovering, to my soul I say
'I recognise thy glory'. (l. 5.592-599)

The readings of this passage are legion, and usually negative. W.J.B. Owen calls the passage a “poetic failure” (106). David S. Miall calls it “a logical failure” (87). It is both of those things perhaps, but it is importantly, and intentionally, failure. Miall shows how Wordsworth had been disappointed many times before, by setting up for himself too-grand expectations. Here, the Poet-Specific (Wordsworth) is a figure of the Poet-General who doesn't *happen* to miss the point of his hike, but *necessarily* misses the point of it, because its greatness is beyond intelligibility.

Furthermore, that “unfathered vapour” that thwarts the “progress of [the poet's] song” stands in for Wordsworth's expressive difficulties, which Derrida posits in “Structure, Sign, and Play,” is due to language's dream of agamogenesis. *Of course the vapour is 'unfathered,'* Derrida would say, *and of course the poem can't continue.*

Derrida argues that for writing to “substitute itself for its own origin,” is an usurpation which amounts to incest (101). Quoting Socrates, Derrida notes that it is an historical violence for speech to “dream its own self-presence,” for it is then capable “of helping itself; and

[believing] itself to be its own father.” Derrida says the same is true for writing. Of the many acts of violence done by writing, (to memory, to speech, to history), this is possibly the worst. Critics may sense this violence, “to memory,” and “to history” in Wordsworth’s failure to honor either of those in *Tintern Abbey*; hence the impassioned debate outlined earlier. Derrida terms it “the original sin,” because the metalepsis imposed on language by writing destroys the myth of “the simple origin” (98-9).

The relationship between speech and writing, as it now stands, is unnatural and violent, according to Derrida, and it is up to the “sciences of language to recover the natural order,” “the purity of its origin” (97-8). Note how similar his project sounds to Wordsworth’s, writing in the 1800 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*:

Poetry, however, in its ancient original condition, was perhaps more vigorous than it is in its modern state. It included, then, the whole burst of the human mind; the whole exertion of its imaginative faculties. It spoke then the language of passion, and no other; for to passion it owed its birth. (427)

Writing enacts a kind of fall from grace, [like Alice Fell’s], because it inverts the proper order of things. For Derrida, Adam usurped the role of his creator by undermining his authority. Likewise, writing has taken the power from its own precursor and thus become the origin and the original sin.

Also, writing does violence to language because it imposes an artificial structure, thereby inhibiting the natural “play” of oral tradition. This concern seems central to reading Wordsworth. Not only is he a collector of “oral traditions,” in his poaching folktales from Britain’s rural poor, but he is careful to capture them in “the real language of men.” But the structure disables him, and some structures, I’ve argued, take over and determine the narratives’ course.

“[Language] is not innocent,” Derrida explains, because the imposed structure, or “clothing,” “imprisons the inside” in the same way that Cartesian Dualism posits the body as a clothing for the soul (97). Writing is not only a “guise for language,” but a “disguise,” because writing, “the exterior figuration,” is “not a [mere] representation.” Rather, “the meaning of the outside is always present within the inside,” and as such, it is a “misrepresentation.” Writing cannot “veil” language without disfiguring it^{xix}.

The “strange external system that is writing” is a “historical usurpation” that “has already begun” to such a degree that presently, “language is first writing” before it is itself (99). Writing’s incestuous replacement of its father has brought about this “fallen condition,” from which linguistics now must try to rise. Derrida suggests a “return to the natural relationship: subordinating writing to speech” (98). Which, despite its “theoretical oddities,” would amount to a kind of reckoning, or restitution; a reversal of the original sin.

The trouble in such an attempt (which Wordsworth surely encountered, and which may explain the failure of his explicit project regarding real language) is that “as necessary preamble to restoring the natural to itself, one must first disassemble the trap” (99). The sin of writing, though, is so great that it must be repressed from our consciousness; “it has breeched living speech,” and thus found itself “within the work of historical repression” (113). And so the “reversal” back to the original, or “natural” is harder work than it was supposed to be; Laius cannot simply rise from the dead.

When language “usurps the main role,” it commits an Oedipal sin: that of becoming its own precursor, thereby committing incest (98). It has, in effect, “broken the norms regulating society,” even the only norm which Derrida takes to be “universal” (87). The crime of the written word is so great because it has made a scandal of the only prohibition “which is both natural and cultural.” Having killed its father, it has obliterated the notion of its father-- “natural

language had never existed, never been intact and untouched by writing,” --leaving no innocence, no Eden to which it can return (113).

Simplon Pass is another place--like Tintern Abbey, and Long Meg--that is fraught with historical meaning for Britain^{xx} and is rendered by Wordsworth as an openness, or a zero. It is another unrepresentable Eden in the Derridean sense. Which is why Fulford says about the stone circle, though he means it historically, “it is a poem of significant absences” (43).

Conclusions

All of this is germane to a discussion of absence as a response to violence as I’ve outlined it here, but I’d like to look now at why this reading matters to any interpretation of Romantic poetry, especially Wordsworth’s. Simply put, an ignorance of Wordsworth’s classical template in Ovid, and of his frequently-used displacement trope has disallowed access, or at the very least, rendered obtuse many poems that snap into focus when given their proper background.

Three Years She Grew, for example, is usually read, with the rest of the Lucy poems, as a complicated metaphysical exploration of the effects of early death on a psyche. Richard Matlak, for one, argues that,

Although the grief of [the poem] is blended with hostility, it remains intense; after the development of the mythical rationalization for Lucy’s death in “Three Years,” her death is, as the lover admits, a memory, an acknowledged event, indicating that the crisis of his mourning period has passed (58).

Geoffrey Hartman argues that “Lucy seems to jump over the crisis of self-consciousness...by dying into nature” (158). Such arguments are typical of the Lucy poems.

That these poems cause such critical difficulty stems from the fact that their poetic precursor has rarely been properly understood. Careful readers of this essay, and of Ovid, may be able to guess my thesis: the Lucy poems are not about a girl who has flower-like qualities; they are about a flower who has girl-like ones.

Our first clue that *Three Years She Grew* is an Ovidian poem occurs within the very first lines.

Three years she grew in sun and shower

Then Nature said, a lovelier flower

On earth was never sown (l. 1-3)

Critics usually bend over backwards to explain how it is that Lucy came to be growing outside. In not only comparing a child with a flower, but conflating them, Wordsworth has pulled off a classically Ovidian trope, that of women metamorphosing into flora, and usually at the point of sexual transgression.

Frances Ferguson is the closest any critic has come to making this claim. She writes that “[when Lucy] is given a corporeal form, it is a flower form, and not a human form,” but then backs off her claim by saying “the similes and metaphors which conflate Lucy with flowers are, of course, merely similes and metaphors” (544).

Her observation is astute, but I can’t completely agree about the similes and metaphors. In Ovid, to say a female has become a tree, or a field of daisies, is to mean it both literally and figuratively. Ferguson continues: “the flowers do not simply locate themselves in Lucy’s cheeks, they expand to absorb the whole of her” (534).

Her article goes on to suggest that such ambiguities highlight Wordsworth as an epistemologically interested poet, rather than a simple nature poet. I think Wordsworth is

interested in more even than these; namely, the uses of allusion, structural and otherwise, and in how a poet can make classicism come alive again in a British and contemporary context.

Then Ferguson makes a final point, wherein she speaks more truly than she may realize, observing that

Personified nature dominates the poem, but with the radical difference from the static visual personifications of much pre-Romantic poetry; this Nature has a speaking voice—and a pre-emptive one at that. It is not a benevolent mother, but rather a Plutonic male.

(544)

“Plutonic” is the *mot juste* here. Ferguson is exactly right to sense the malevolence of Nature in this poem, although she does not go on to develop the theme in her essay. I contend that in this exercise, “Nature” is actually a triumvirate of Ovidian characters: Pygmalion, Pluto, and Eros.

Like Pygmalion in Ovid’s account, “Nature” in Wordsworth’s poem is ultimately crafting Lucy into the ideal mate for himself. Not only will her form be reared “to stately height,” and not only will “her virgin bosom swell,” which is the basis of making her an ideal sexual partner, but she will love the things that he loves—“The stars of midnight shall be dear to her—and his subjects (if we consider this masculine spirit of nature as a kind of king) will respect his queen: “The floating clouds their state shall lend/ To her, for her the willow bend.”

In this project, Nature is exactly like the sculptor Pygmalion who fashions a love for himself out of similarly pliable materials. We could almost mistake the beginning of Wordsworth’s poem for the beginning of Ovid’s.

This child I to myself will take,
She shall be mine, and I will make
A Lady of my own. (l. 4-6)

Both decide arbitrarily to craft lovers for themselves. Wordsworth's Nature fantasizes about his creation just as Ovid's Pygmalion does about his. Nature imagines, after he has imagined "her virgin bosom swelling,"

Such thoughts to Lucy will I give
While she and I together live
Here in this happy dell.

While Pygmalion imagines of his creation that

His kisses
She fancies, she returns; he speaks to her,
Holds her, believes his fingers almost leave
An imprint on her limbs, and fears to bruise her. (l. 10.392-396)

For Wordsworth to become a Pygmalion--whether he is giving alms that offer new life, or offering a new cloak and a ride to a new city, or whether he is fabricating a mythology in which he can comfortably move is to suggest the artists' struggle with his work and tools. If the artist works in words, the contest is the ego's asserting itself against the structural pull of language.

Emile Benveniste discusses the critical implications for the poet's charge, and finds himself on the dilemma's horns, playing up the violence of the contest. Benveniste speaks of language as being both subservient to and dominant over man. His terminology illustrates a power struggle between the Created, in this case: man, and the Creator: language. This is of course the same problem Wordsworth wrestles with as Pygmalion: an ur-text on the Creator/Created problem.

"Language is transcendent," Benveniste writes in "Subjectivity in Language," in that it resides, "in the nature of man," and in its preexistence to man; "he did not fabricate it" (728). Benveniste predicts the refutation, "but isn't language an invention of man?" He answers, "we

can never get back to man separated from language and we shall never see him inventing it.” No, then; language is not an invention of man, it is rather the other way around, “language makes man.”

When he *describes* language however, Benveniste uses tool-terms. Speech is described as “assuming an instrumental or vehicular function (729). Instruments and vehicles are both inventions of man, (unlike language) which he has created for the purposes of doing work. Although he must be initiated into their use, he is their master.

Benveniste makes the distinction between “language” and “speech,” and although he describes language as transcendent to man, speech is entirely subservient to him. He has said, “language is form, not substance,” but then goes on to call speech, at least “the individual act of speech,” “a thing which we exchange,” “an object” (725, 729). Of course this is no relaxation of Benveniste’s critical attention; rather, it illustrates the structure which he finds inherent to the language/mind transaction.

There may be four levels in Benveniste’s power structure. He begins, “the sign overlies and commands reality,” and then, “it is in and through language that man constitutes himself as a subject, because language alone establishes the concept of ‘ego’ in reality, in its reality which is that of the being,” and “the individual act of speech is a thing which we exchange” (729).

Would Benveniste’s hierarchy then look something like this: Sign (overlying and commanding reality), Language (the reality of being), Man (subject in reality), Speech (tool of man)?

For a man to “speak ego” is for him to reassert his dominance over the force that created him. “This is language in so far as it is taken over by the man who is speaking,” Benveniste writes (732). Keats, who believes famously that the poet is “nothing,” that “he has no Identity^{xxi}” because “he is continually filling some other body” accuses Wordsworth of trading on the “egotistical sublime^{xxii}” because of his “self assertion,” or “speaking ego” in Benveniste’s terms.

Although Benveniste says that language makes man, he is acutely aware of a battle for position between language and man, realizing that if man is made by language, he also uses language, and has a position of power in relation to it. He quotes Saussure, in agreement, “language is radically powerless to defend itself against the forces which from one moment to the next are shifting the relationship between the signified and the signifier” (727). Language, for Benveniste, has power, does things, but that power is usurped. He describes even the theories regarding language in terms of battle, “the linguist will one day, perhaps be able to *attack*,” and, “to establish a relationship as arbitrary is for the linguist a way of *defending* himself” (726). These are, of course, academic terms which are not specific to Benveniste (any position can be “attacked” or “defended”) but in this context they are worth noticing.

Throughout these texts, Benveniste has been describing the power relationship between the two middle forces of his hierarchy, “language makes man and he did not fabricate it,” vs. “this is language so far as it has been taken over by the man who is speaking.” This rebellion seems to me akin to the godly violence of Cronos’ killing by Zeus; which myth has its exact analog in Wordsworth’s line “the child is father of the man^{xxiii}.”

This excursion into Benveniste’s thought is important, I think, because the the question of fabrication is at issue in these poems of Wordsworth’s. There is a palpable struggle in this work of the individual or poetic ego against the various pulls of history, memory, language (or structure) and mythic precursor.

The sense of violence present in *Three Years She Grew* is already there in Wordsworth’s template in *The Metamorphoses*. It doesn’t come solely from these passages regarding Pygmalion. “Lucy,” the feminized form of the Latin “Lucas,” means “sacred grove.” In Ovid, this fact alone suggests that an attempt has been made on her virtue, usually in the form of a rape.

Women are constantly becoming trees beloved of gods, or “sacred groves,” in flight from their would-be ravishers in the Ovidian myth-cycle.

If Nature, in *Three Years She Grew*, forms his ideal lover in one sense, and thereby becomes a Pygmalion-figure, in another, he abducts a young girl to whom he is already attracted, and thereby becomes a Plutonian.

Remember that Nature has mused, “three years she grew in sun and shower,” before calling her “a lovely flower,” and deciding,

This Child I to myself will take,
 She shall be mine, and I will make
 A Lady of my own.

In Ovid, young Proserpina is gathering “lovely flowers” of her own, in sun and showers when “in one moment, / Or almost one, she was seen, loved, and taken/ In Pluto’s rush of love” (119). Pluto then takes the young girl to his kingdom to be his wife, thereby making “a lady” of her.

Part of the reason that the Lucy poems have remained enigmatic and interesting these past two hundred years is structural. They have built into their poetic method the literature of the ages, most tellingly, Wordsworth’s own favorite work from the classical period, *The Metamorphoses*. His poetry, as exemplified by the readings herein, takes part in the Romantic myth project of re-creating a localized mythology for England through appropriating the myth structures and literature of the antiquity and building around them his own vision of pastoral piety in the twilight of an empire consciously built on that model, his own too-much-with-us world. It also enacts the struggle of the ego against the language that may have created him, and in that sense, exists as a fulcrum on which turns a war which was old by the time Ovid arrived at its battlefield, and to whose detritus our own linguistic theorists enthusiastically contribute.

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i Triton, in this case, whose horn-blowing pulls the winds up and off the watered surface of the world.

ii As far as I can tell, it is theologically unsound to pray to the Christian God petitioning the return of the Pagan gods to glory.

iii E.g. Triton cannot come back in glory and bring the classical past with him.

iv See: *The Ringers in the Tower: Studies in Romantic Tradition*; or *The Map of Misreading*.

v Defined, obviously, in the broader sense.

vi See: The So-called 'Oldest Programme for a System of German Idealism,' appendix to *The Genealogical Approach to the Romantic Symbol*, by Nicholas Halmi.

vii For pleasure, that is; for scholarly purposes, I use Stephen Gill's edition.

viii Jerome McGann, Majorie Levinson, and Alan Liu have offered insightful criticisms of Wordsworth for glossing over the social dimensions of his characters and their stories. See: *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation*, *The Romantic Fragment Poem: A Critique of a Form*, and *Wordsworth: The Sense of History*, respectively.

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x Wolfe, Greg. "What's Wrong with Sentimentality?" *Intruding Upon the Timeless: Meditations on Art, Faith, and Mystery*. Square Halo Publishing, 2001.

xi This will depend, of course, on the translation of Ovid you read; still, the similarity is notable.

xii As "Alice Fell" rather does without this reading, having been largely ignored both critically and popularly.

xiii Bailey, Nathan. *Ovid's Metamorphosis...with the arguments and notes of John Minellius*. 7th ed. 1787.

xiv Sandy, George. *Ovid's Metamorphosis Englished, Mythologiz'd, and Represented in Figures*. Oxford, 1632.

xv Wordsworth's own Fenwick note and Dorothy Wordsworth's journal entry on the poem both identify the source of the story as a Mr. Graham of Glasgow.

xvi Coleridge found the poem so dull he criticized it in the *Biographia Literaria*, opining that the story would have been better recounted in prose; the criticism sufficiently stung Wordsworth. He omitted "Alice Fell" from editions of his poetry from some years after.

xvii *Tintern Abbey* was composed, if the title is to be believed, on 13 July, 1798. Wordsworth set out on a tour of the islands of Cumberland and Scotland on 12 July, 1833.

xviii “If I thought that I was replying to someone who would ever return to the world, this flame would cease to flicker. But since no one ever returns from these depths alive, if what I’ve heard is true, I will answer you without fear of infamy.”

xix Derrida writes, “we can pronounce not a single destructive proposition which has not already had to slip into the form, logic, and implicit postulations of precisely what it seeks to contest” (85). In the contest of language, the imposition of the written image forces the language into those “forms and logics and implicit postulations.”

21 To R. Woodhouse Oct. 27, 1818

xxiii From “My Heart Leaps Up When I Behold”