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978-0-521-13157-5 - Wordsworth's Revisionary Aesthetics

Theresa M. Kelley

Excerpt

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## I

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*Introduction*

THIS BOOK is about Wordsworth's aesthetics and, in particular, the rhetorical competition between its sublime and beautiful figures. Like Thomas DeQuincey, who praised the Arab dream in *The Prelude* and as “*ne plus ultra* of sublimity,” modern readers tend to assume that Wordsworth's poetic achievement is his celebration of Romantic sublimity and transcendence.<sup>1</sup> If this reputation has of late become something of a liability in the eyes of some readers, most still admire what DeQuincey admired: those close encounters with the sublime that recur throughout Wordsworth's poetry. Because it registers competing versions of Romantic sublimity, the Arab dream offers a point of entry into this critical debate. What DeQuincey probably meant by “sublimity” in this instance was “greatness of style and subject,” a definition that would have satisfied most eighteenth-century theorists. Modern theorists have emphasized the transcendent vision of the sublime speaker or hero. The Arab dream suggests a more critical view of sublime transcendence. Although the dreamer (or the speaker himself in the 1832–50 poem) wants to help the Arab Don Quixote bury his “treasures,” a stone and a shell, to save them from being destroyed by a deluge, he cannot because the Arab rides off, abandoning the dreamer to other narrative quests and solutions in the expanded *Prelude*.<sup>2</sup> As an isolated figure who refuses help and company, Wordsworth's Arab Don Quixote dramatizes the underside of sublime transcendence – a rebellious disregard for the rest of society. Like all sublime figures, Wordsworth's Arab wants to be alone.

Even in eighteenth-century treatises on aesthetics, these versions of the sublime collide when writers who set out to praise Milton's sublime style end up praising Milton's Satan, the hero whose sublimity so attracts and repels Romantic writers. For Keats and Hazlitt, Romantic sublimity was as much a liability as an achievement.

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According to Keats, isolation and self-aggrandizement are endemic to the “wordsworthian or egotistical sublime.” Although Wordsworth is not the declared object of Hazlitt’s charge that poetry or imagination is by nature “an exaggerating and exclusive faculty,” the charge echoes terms he used on other occasions to praise or blame Wordsworth’s poetry. For Hazlitt, what the (sublime or Wordsworthian) imagination lacks is understanding, that faculty which “seeks the greatest quantity of ultimate good, by justice and proportion.”<sup>3</sup>

In this century critics have been more enthusiastic about the Wordsworthian sublime. In his influential survey of eighteenth-century theories of the sublime, Samuel Monk argued that its Romantic apotheosis occurs in Wordsworth’s poetry. For Geoffrey Hartman, Wordsworth’s stance as a “halted traveller” before the sublime is a resonant image of what Romanticism is about: a moment in which the longing for apocalypse or transcendence is laid bare. And in the last decade the sublime has become a major critical theme – or ideology – with specific methodological investments in, for example, sublime figures that compulsively reenact the indeterminacy of figures.<sup>4</sup> In Wordsworth’s Arab dream, the speaker’s ambivalence about the Arab suggests why modern readers might also question a single-minded regard for Romantic sublimity. Even as the speaker admits that the Arab’s quest is attractive, he recognizes a competing set of concerns. If all trot off as the Arab chooses to do, he observes, no one will be left to tend “wives,” “children,” “virgin loves” – “whatsoever else the heart holds dear” (154–55, p. 158). Readers of the Arab dream who have been similarly attracted by the figure of an Arab Don Quixote do not attach much value to this reluctant but instructive expression of misgiving. Yet surely abandoning what the heart holds dear has social and, I will argue, poetic consequences. These concerns are not all that matters to Wordsworth’s speaker, but they do matter.

This study argues that for most of his career Wordsworth was at least as suspicious of the sublime as Keats and Hazlitt were because, like them, he recognized that sublime transcendence might become little more than sublime egotism. Wordsworth’s suspicion of the sublime prompted a “twofold” aesthetics that is critical to his emergence as a major poet. The two poles of this aesthetics, the sublime and the beautiful, derive from a well-known antithesis in earlier aesthetic theory, in part familiar to Wordsworth by way of Edmund Burke. But whereas Burke primarily describes differences between sublimity and beauty, and suggests their opposition, Wordsworth presents this opposition as an aesthetic conflict whose rhetorical complexity is a singular poetic achievement. As a quasi-Burkean aesthetic of social

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norms and hierarchies, the Wordsworthian beautiful opposes the wilful self-aggrandizement of the revolutionary or Satanic sublime, advocating instead communicability and a sense of known limits in art as well as society. If this account of the beautiful clearly evokes Burkean and Tory values, it also engages the poetic project Wordsworth announced in the 1800 *Lyrical Ballads* – to create a poetic speech adequate for a community of speakers and listeners.

This aesthetic conflict is absent in poems Wordsworth composed before the middle of the 1790s. Like the poets of sensibility and those of his contemporaries who supported France during the early phases of its revolution, he initially identified the sublime with original genius and human freedom. Thus in the 1793 *Descriptive Sketches*, he echoes Thomson's praise of "Britannia" in *The Seasons*:

Oh give, great God, to Freedom's waves to ride  
Sublime o'er Conquest, Avarice, and Pride,  
To break, the vales where Death and Famine scow'rs,  
And dark Oppression builds her thick-ribb'd tow'rs.<sup>5</sup>

Although this freedom belongs not to English imperialism but to revolutionary France, the style and aesthetic preference of the passage are otherwise faithful to the Thomsonian model. Wordsworth would never again offer so unequivocal a celebration of the sublime. After 1793, he began to ask pressing questions about the value of sublime isolation and transcendence as opposed to the preservation of communities (living and dead) and communicability. Long after Napoleon's final defeat, this political occasion continued to structure Wordsworth's aesthetics. In poems he composed or revised after 1800, the revolutionary sublime is a resonant image of poetic figures that speak for, or of, what resists representation (political as well as linguistic), whereas the beautiful is an image of poetic figures that aspire to full or adequate representability.

Despite obvious and important similarities between this aesthetics and its predecessors, two features of Wordsworth's aesthetics are distinctive. First, Wordsworth repeatedly describes sublimity and beauty as successive, then competing, categories. Even when he does not, vestiges of this aesthetic progress haunt those poems where sublimity and beauty are in conflict. Second, more than any earlier writer on aesthetics, he dramatizes the rhetorical implications of aesthetic differences. This claim requires some explanation. As critics have long recognized, the earliest treatise on aesthetics, Longinus's *On the Sublime*, is explicitly concerned with the rhetoric of the sublime style. And in less explicit ways, so are Burke's *Enquiry concerning the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, Kant's *Critique*

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of *Judgement*, and a number of other eighteenth-century treatises in which aesthetics and rhetoric are presented as parallel inquiries. Yet none of these writers explored the difference between sublimity and beauty as insistently as Wordsworth did. The logic of this insistence derives, I think, from the lingering power of Wordsworth's early recognition that the revolutionary sublime is an uncanny double of the transcendent freedom and self-consciousness which modern readers find in Kant's account of the sublime. More than the older Burke, who also rewrote his earlier preference for the sublime in the light and shadow of revolutionary France, Wordsworth chose to embody the practical and irrevocable difference between sublimity and beauty in the turns and counter-turns of poetic figures.

The first goal of this study is to describe the role of Wordsworth's revisionary aesthetics in the early as well as the mature stages of his poetic career. The second aim is to examine the relation between this aesthetics and Wordsworth's understanding of the representational task of poetic language. The sublime and the beautiful articulate extreme views of what poetry may or may not represent. In Wordsworth's poetry, on one side of the moment of "blockage" – which Neil Hertz has identified in the literature of the sublime – is the sublime, which promotes the mind's sense of being halted before unexpressed or unexpressible ideas.<sup>6</sup> On the other side is the beautiful, whose occasion for speech is the threat of its loss. On this side too are arrayed the interests of language, especially poetic language, as an expressive vehicle always eager (or anxious in some versions of this debate) to counter the inexpressibility which the sublime figures. Whether the beautiful is read as a figure of compensation or representation (or both), it signals the value which texts and speakers necessarily attach to the expression of meaning and thus to words or figures that bring meaning to the surfaces of texts. Unlike Hazlitt, who supposed that the imagination is by nature a sublime, self-aggrandizing power and the understanding something outside the imagination, in Wordsworth's aesthetics of sublimity and beauty both belong to the imagination; together they perform the essential representational tasks of his art, much as the autobiographical speaker of *The Prelude* undergoes an aesthetic education "by beauty and by fear" that prepares him for his work as a poet. The double project of this education is to allow sublime utterance, yet somehow contain it within the poetic forms and figures of the beautiful.

Prior to Wordsworth, the representational status of aesthetic determinations was a persistent theme among aesthetic theorists, especially Longinus, Burke, and Kant. Wordsworth's version of this theme is

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distinguished by its excavations of hidden, sublime figures and its efforts to compose the poetic surfaces which those figures disrupt. And, unlike Kant's, his aesthetics is continually subject to ideological pressures. As Wordsworth turned against revolutionary France, the revolutionary sublime became a major vehicle for his investigation of what is at stake in all contests for power over language – whether those contests take place in political centers of power like the French senate, or in poetic speech. For the next thirty years, he entertained or half-invented several versions of the sublime: the revolutionary sublime, a transcendent consciousness that resembles the sublimity of Kant and Hegel, and the “intense unity” of a less problematic (and less frequently presented) sublime.

Throughout this period Wordsworth remained attentive to his earlier recognition of the essential and difficult relation between language and power in all acts of representation. In this regard the sublime and the beautiful assisted his mature understanding of a reiterated contest between the need to represent meaning, and the difficulties which impede that representation. Much like Browning, who would later define poetry as “putting the infinite within the finite,” Wordsworth asserts that poetry is, like religion or theology, bound to the task of providing “sensuous incarnation” for “transcendent” meaning and yet equally bound to recognize the difficulty, even the improbability, of that task.<sup>7</sup> So described, even in the late 1790s Wordsworth's aesthetic project anticipated the values some have assigned to a later, Biedermeier phase of Romanticism or to Victorianism. My point here is not to imply that the early Wordsworth was a Victorian in Romantic guise. Instead, I will argue that the rhetorical tension that marks both his early and late revisionary aesthetics is a thoroughly Romantic achievement. As such, it claims these Romantic analogues: Blake's contraries of circumference or bounding line vs. exploding (or imploding) form; the shifting, transgressive boundaries of character and estate in Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*; Shelley's Mt. Blanc as one of many images that resist yet invite figuration and rhyme; or Keats's figures of apostrophe, whose double nature (expressive, inexpressive; present, absent) repeats the larger pattern of Wordsworth's aesthetics.<sup>8</sup>

My thinking about Wordsworth's poetry and aesthetics owes much to recent critics, in particular Geoffrey Hartman and Herbert Lindenberger, whose divergent accounts of Wordsworth's poetical character have instructed my own.<sup>9</sup> Like W. J. B. Owen, I argue that beauty and sublimity are paired aesthetic values in Wordsworth's poetry and prose. However, whereas Owen concludes that Wordsworth's aes-

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thetic principles are primarily Burkean, I argue that a number of singular differences mark Wordsworth's relation to Burke. For Albert Wlecke, the Wordsworthian sublime is the "sense sublime" of "Lines composed a few miles above Tintern Abbey," where phenomenological wholeness keeps at bay aspects of the sublime that Wordsworth develops in other poems. The range of Thomas Weiskel's *The Romantic Sublime* is more inclusive.<sup>10</sup> Although his argument is often unnecessarily difficult, its attention to the rhetorical and semiotic features of the Romantic sublime is exemplary. According to Weiskel, the Wordsworthian sublime presents a struggle whose contours are nominally Burkean but more insistently Kantian, Hegelian, and most of all oedipal. I question whether this struggle is also Wordsworthian and Romantic.

Like Weiskel, other critics who are equally preoccupied with the sublime tend to neglect Wordsworth's use of other figures and contexts to mediate sublime encounters. Two recent studies suggest how we might understand the poetic effects of such mediations. David Simpson argues that Wordsworth's metaphors refigure rather than dismiss reality. Such figurings and refigurings are, I suggest, the project of the Wordsworthian beautiful. Using a more explicitly thematic approach, David Pirie calls needed attention to the antithetical spirit in Wordsworth's poetry, which Pirie presents as the difference between "grandeur and tenderness,"<sup>11</sup> but because these terms appear in a cancelled passage of the expanded *Prelude* and are later revised for inclusion in *The Excursion*, I interpret them as an already domesticated version of a more persistent rhetorical competition between sublimity and beauty.

Because it has become very nearly a critical commonplace to assume that the Wordsworthian sublime repeats the critical gestures of the Kantian model, I want to summarize how these two models differ, and suggest why they differ. Were the issue one of philosophical rigor, the Kantian model would have the strongest claim on our attention. The world of transcendent, supersensible ideas which the Kantian sublime makes available to human consciousness is probably the best that has been thought or said on the subject.<sup>12</sup> Yet it is a model that defines itself outside the pressures of history and human failure. Published in 1790, a year after the Fall of the Bastille, Kant's third *Critique* avoids the potential for boundless self-aggrandizement which Wordsworth and his contemporaries identified with the revolutionary sublime.<sup>13</sup> It also seeks to avoid, with limited success, the troubled relation between rhetorical figures and the sublime which is in varying degrees at issue for Longinus, Burke, and Wordsworth. Unlike Kant, Wordsworth's

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conception of the sublime is fraught with subjective measures of its political and semiotic hazards. Here one contrast will suffice to indicate the degree of difference between the two models. Whereas Kant neutralizes the sublime by making its existence depend on the operations of the reason, Wordsworth supposes that reason acts on behalf of the beautiful. Thus cordoned off from the sublime (and the French Revolution), reason serves ends unlike those Wordsworth believed revolutionary leaders often made it serve. To prevent the dream of reason from creating sublime monsters, Wordsworth assigned it to the beautiful, where it would function within the framework of social, human affections.

If Kantian disinterestedness was not possible for Wordsworth, it was in varying degrees also not possible for other Romantic writers for whom revolutionary France became a haunting image of disruptive powers which Kant had inadvertently allegorized. Romantic rebels like Victor Frankenstein, his monster offspring, and Napoleon limn the darker side of the freedom to soar beyond natural limits which Kant excludes or at best minimizes by attaching the mind's recognition of its sublimity to the realm of supersensible ideas. Post-structuralist critics who have used the Kantian model to define the Wordsworthian and Romantic sublimines have in effect tried to legitimize an absorption in and by the sublime, which Wordsworth and other Romantic writers could not afford. The irony of this strong misreading and its attachment to what Jerome Christensen has called the "romance of the other"<sup>14</sup> should not be missed: such absorption repeats the sublime self-aggrandizement which Kant's definition excludes. Moreover, it has influenced critics who otherwise have little tolerance for Romantic sublimity and transcendence. On several occasions Jerome McGann has taken Wordsworth's poetry to task for its sublime self-absorption.<sup>15</sup> Although I grant that Wordsworth felt the attraction of the "wordsworthian or egotistical sublime" as strongly as any Romantic writer, this study attempts to show that because he also understood the hazards of the sublime as well or better than any of his contemporaries, he harnessed it to a reiterated aesthetic contest with the beautiful. This contest, not an uncritical allegiance to the sublime style and its figures, is the scene of Wordsworth's aesthetic instruction.

This study approaches Wordsworth's aesthetics by way of his prose commentaries on aesthetics and landscape. Although all of them witness Wordsworth's desire to construct a coherent aesthetic model, none of them presents such a model. Yet collectively they suggest why he illustrated aesthetic principles with natural analogues and why these analogues could not suffice. In brief, they are no more and no less

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than mapping strategies for an aesthetics that at once resists and invites schematization. For this reason, the role of place, topography, or landscape in this aesthetics is characteristically (or maddeningly) Wordsworthian. As a poet he never, I think, needed to “raise” or remove himself from an obsession with place as such.<sup>16</sup> But the adhesiveness with which he insisted on the proximity between literal places and their figures tends to obscure the extent to which sublime and beautiful “places” are figures. Nature or, more precisely, landscape or topography is in Wordsworth’s poems oddly numinous. That is to say, it is not strictly animist in either the primitive or the Ovidian sense. Instead, its aura of animation is more like receptivity – as if it were a container or receptacle for human history. The first part of this formulation Wordsworth implies in phrases like “forms perennial of the ancient hills.” One argument of this study addresses the second part – the claim that Wordsworth historicizes places. This conception of place is not genuinely abstract, though it hinges on an attitude toward landscape which might be called “cartographic” – hence my frequent use of the term *topography* in this study. In Wordsworth’s poems nature is map-like or, as he says in the first *Essay upon Epitaphs*, like “an image gathered from a map,” one which assumes that spirit is the inhabitant of its places. In Wordsworth’s aesthetics poetic figures manage the “crossings” between the letter of sublime and beautiful landscapes and their spirit by asserting their proximity.

In his *Guide through the District of the Lakes*, Wordsworth asserts that nature’s earliest “dealings” with the surface of the earth produce sublime, undifferentiated forms. Subsequent “dealings” tend toward the production of beauty, which transforms sublime mountain forms by modifying their primitive contours. According to this model of aesthetic progress, the sublime is below, the beautiful above. However, in the manuscript fragment which W. J. B. Owen and Jane W. Smyser have titled “The Sublime and the Beautiful,” he describes an aesthetics that is potentially riddled with fissures and disruptions.<sup>17</sup> The theme of this second account is an aesthetic progress in the mind that roughly corresponds to the one Wordsworth attributes to nature in the *Guide*. The difference between the two models is the struggle for dominance which ensues in the second as soon as the mind is able to entertain beauty as well as sublimity. To call attention to the importance Wordsworthian speakers attach to the retrieval of this aesthetic conflict, I suggest that Wordsworth’s *Guide* and his unfinished manuscript on aesthetics imply two different models of archeological excavation – models that reflect contemporary hypotheses about the geological history of the earth. These Wordsworth knew from a



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variety of popular and scientific sources, including travel narratives, Enlightenment theories concerning the age of the earth and its formation, and early nineteenth-century discussions of the geology of the Lake District and the Alps. In the first of the models suggested by Wordsworth's *Guide*, a simple excavation of an uninterrupted aesthetic sequence images – or seeks to image – a similar sequence in the mind. In the second, aesthetic rivalries complicate the work of poetic excavation as sublime depths show themselves unwilling to remain “below,” and beautiful surfaces work to suppress sublime intrusions. We can, I think, still use archeological figures to describe this second model simply because a recurrent longing for the first kind of excavation continues to structure this more complicated relation between sublimity and beauty.

To put the relation between them as a modern archeologist might, we could say that the *Guide* model is the ideal of excavation, whereas the manuscript fragment comes closer to actual practice in the field, where repeated disruptions of the original sequence in which strata were deposited make it difficult to determine which came first and how artifacts embedded in different strata are related to each other. Wordsworth's fragment on aesthetics uncomfortably acknowledges this difficulty by granting that the sublime and the beautiful compete for precedence in the mind. His major poems more frequently register this kind of archeological excavation as speakers encounter repeated disruptions of a simple aesthetic progress. Like the “archeology” of Michel Foucault's *Les Mots et les Choses* or *The Archeology of Knowledge*,<sup>18</sup> this second use of archeology as a figure emphasizes the gaps or baffling discontinuities that occur in Wordsworth's poetry when one aesthetic figure gives way to another. The aesthetic tension that marks these moments suggests a dialectical spiral something like Hegel's, except that what looks like synthesis in Wordsworth's aesthetics is more likely to be the beautiful, whose suppressions eventually yield to other sublime disruptions. If this tension is dialectical, its penchant for disequilibrium is probably more Blakean than Hegelian.<sup>19</sup>

Despite important differences, Freud's use of archeology as a figure for psychoanalysis provides an instructive parallel for Wordsworth's aesthetic project. Presenting himself as “a conscientious archeologist” in his preface to “A Case of Hysteria,” Freud claims for psychoanalysis the certitudes of archeology as a science and method,<sup>20</sup> much as Wordsworth constructed a model for nature's successive “dealings” which he hoped to impose on poetic figures that undermine an uninterrupted aesthetic sequence. Even as psychic topographies rarely,

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if ever, yield either a fixed stratigraphic sequence or a single place for psychic artifacts, neither do Wordsworth's efforts to portray the mind's aesthetic "dealings" achieve the stability posited by his archeology of nature. For both Wordsworth and Freud, the mind's archeologies are created by an ego whose self-defense and self-definition require frequent disruptions and occlusions of psychic stratigraphies. For the older Freud and for post-Freudian readers of such defenses, the search for psychic origins, like Wordsworth's efforts to retrieve the sublime as "other," is persistently undermined as the mind contaminates what it retrieves.<sup>21</sup> Both writers present stratified psychic topographies that may and often do shift without warning, like pieces in a kaleidoscope, to create a new archeology and thus to require yet another excavation.

One difference between Freud and Wordsworth concerns what they retrieve and where they get it. This study deals primarily with the textual strategies which Wordsworthian speakers use to retrieve suppressed knowledge – i.e., what they know but choose not to declare. The parallel Freudian project deals with what has been repressed, which finds its way into texts and speech, if it finds its way at all, via figures that produce dislocated images of what is repressed. Yet insofar as Wordsworth's sublime and beautiful figures enact the same dislocating strategies, the parallel remains instructive. Like the older Freud, Wordsworth seems to have been as much interested in how the mind defends itself against the sublime as he was in the sublime itself. In this sense the sublime is important because it is an occasion for rhetorical and figurative strategies that enable the poetic effort to retrieve (or not to retrieve) it.

In Wordsworth's poems this aesthetic conflict between poetic surfaces and depths often makes it difficult to pull one layer back and distinguish it from another or several others beneath it. It is as if Wordsworth had inscribed aesthetic figures on a stratigraphic map whose layers have been fused together or laminated. Let me try to explain what happens to speakers or readers of such passages by considering the layers or strata in one of the most celebrated "sublime" encounters of Wordsworth's poetry, the sequence in *The Prelude*, vi, that begins when the speaker discovers that he has unwittingly crossed the Alps. My contentions are that the Ravine of Arve passage is less indebted to the sublime than it is to the beautiful for its figuration and that the aesthetic difficulty with it and the apostrophe to the Imagination that precedes it is that they tend to stick together despite their aesthetic and rhetorical differences.

The speaker's apostrophe to the Imagination is, as many readers