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By

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Ah me, that all
The terrors, all the early miseries,
Regrets, vexations, lassitudes, that all
The thoughts and feelings which have been infused
Into my mind, should ever have made up
The calm existence that is mine when I
Am worthy of myself.

—Wordsworth (The Prelude, 1805, I, 355-61)

This thesis is dedicated to everyone who helped along the way,
but most of all to my mother.
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The moving accident is not my trade;  
To freeze the blood I have no ready arts:  
'Tis my delight, alone in summer shade,  
To pipe a simple song for thinking hearts.¹

INTRODUCTION

As a historical form, the gothic novel flourished during William Wordsworth’s lifetime (1770-1850)—commonly considered to be bookended by Horace Walpole’s The Castle of Otranto (1764) and Charles Maturin’s Melmoth the Wanderer (1820). During these years, “gothic” had not taken on its modern meaning and was not regarded as a genre of literature, but rather as a collection of novels “more or less crudely sensationalist, in that they tended to derive their force from the portrayal of extreme situations, mostly situations of terror” (Punter 8). Today, critics tend to measure literary gothicism by the text’s effect on its reader (physiological), the form of the text (structural), the presence of certain motifs (tropological), or by a combination of these things. Certainly, gothic novels often utilize particular conventions in constructing their respective “situations of terror” and lists of such conventions commonly include castles, ruins, ghosts, convents, tyrannical fathers, claustrophobic spaces, live burials, subterranean caverns, uncanny occurrences, madness, and the threat of rape or murder, to name very few. By the 1790’s, when the gothic novel virtually dominated the literary market, these devices became so widely recognized as to merit parody, such as

in Austen’s *Northanger Abbey*. The continued critical debate over what constitutes the gothic only affirms that it is easier to recognize than it is to define.

Giving consideration to the myriad of definitions of gothic offered by literary scholars, I find Eve Sedgwick’s definition most useful. Shirking the more common notion of the gothic as a rigid genre or set of works or conventions, Sedgwick treats the gothic as a mode—one which a writer might move in or out of with unlimited frequency, regardless of the genre to which they are perceived to contribute. Operating with this definition, a reader might write “gothic” in the margin of a Victorian novel, a bible, or a children’s book as justifiably as they might write “gothic” in the margins of *The Castle of Otranto*. Sedgwick’s definition allows us, as readers and literary scholars, the opportunity to call the gothic by name where it, as a literary mode, is implemented, even when it is not expected or traditionally recognized.

In his youth, Wordsworth read poets such as James Beattie, Helen Maria Williams, Charlotte Smith, Robert Blair, and Edward Young, and practiced his own hand at gothic poems in imitation of their works (*The Earliest Poems* ix). His first published poem, “Sonnnet, on Seeing Helen Maria Williams Weep at a Tale of Distress” (1786), traces a gothic fantasy that still pales in comparison to that within the most ambitious poem of his youth, *The Vale of Esthwaite*. Despite these gothic roots, modern critics have generally supposed that Wordsworth’s experimentation with the gothic mode was limited to his early poems; that his juvenile interest in the gothic ended once he became interested in the higher art of poetic naturalism. To be sure,

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\(^2\) See chapter one of Sedgwick’s *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions*. 

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Wordsworth would go on to make pronouncements against gothic literature, most famously in the preface to the 1800 *Lyrical Ballads* wherein he rejects the “frantic novels, sickly and stupid German Tragedies, and deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse” on the grounds that they “blunt the discriminating powers of the mind” (*Romanticism* 449-50). For Wordsworth, the gothic was lowly art—sensational, debased productions detrimental to the taste and morality of readers. Still, much of Wordsworth’s mature writing reflects the mode that he militated against. His poetry, in *Lyrical Ballads* and beyond, includes sensational elements such as ghosts, madness, and epic despair.

To understand the plan behind *Lyrical Ballads*, we might turn to *Biographia Literaria*, in which Coleridge claims the volume was supposed to consist of two varieties of poems:

> It was agreed that my endeavors directed to persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic…Mr. Wordsworth, on the other hand, was to propose to himself as his object to give the charm of novelty to things of the every day, and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural, by awakening the mind’s attention from the lethargy of custom and direction it to the loveliness and the wonders of the worlds before us. (qtd. Clery 172)

While we must warily regard *Biographia* as a document composed nearly two decades after *Lyrical Ballads* and long after the deterioration of Wordsworth and Coleridge’s relationship, it is nevertheless true that Wordsworth’s poetry, both within *Lyrical*
Ballads and beyond, bears testimony to his skill in presenting “things of the every day” in such a way as to “excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural.” Even his masterpiece, The Prelude, is haunted by a presence recognizable as his own deceased father. We might question, then, why Wordsworth’s early experimentation with the gothic, and later philosophical rejection of it, has become the common critical summary of a relationship that is hardly this simple?

Of course, this study is not the first to point out Wordsworth’s tendency to incorporate the gothic mode into his writing. Michael Gamer, for instance, makes the case that Wordsworth frequently indulges his “gothic predilections” but uses elaborate authorial positioning in order to reject the gothic even as he presents it. Lyrical Ballads, for instance, was supposed to be a philosophical vehicle promoting the beauty of the rustic, natural, and pastoral. Yet it seems Wordsworth was aware that many poems in the 1798 volume contained the sensational qualities he publicly opposed. Its advertisement singles out the most heavily gothic poems in the volume, “Goody Blake and Harry Gill,” “The Thorn,” and “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” and urges the reader not to reject these poems on the grounds that they are “too low” (Romanticism 331). According to Gamer, poor reviews of the collection, and particularly the more supernatural poems, led Wordsworth to open his 1800 edition of Lyrical Ballads with what has become the most famous manifesto against the gothic. Moreover, he added notes to the most gothic poems to control further how his reader interpreted them. These tactics, which allowed Wordsworth to reject and incorporate the gothic simultaneously, reflect:
trepidation at a time when both the costs and benefits of appropriating gothic conventions are high. They also allow Wordsworth to separate himself from his contemporaries who traffic in similar, suspect materials. His treatment is governed by a kind of double perspective—one that seeks to retain gothic materials at the same time that it historicizes, critiques, rejects, neutralizes, or otherwise disguises their Gothicism. (Gamer 14)

Wordsworth’s strategic distancing of his work from the gothic has certainly worked on contemporary scholars who seem unwilling to place the words “gothic” and “Wordsworth” in close proximity. For instance, David Punter’s chapter “Gothic and Romanticism” explores the gothic’s presence in the works of Blake, Coleridge, Shelley, Byron, and Keats, but leaves Wordsworth conspicuously absent. He excuses Wordsworth from his discussion with a single footnote that reads “It seems to me correct to exclude Wordsworth from this argument” (112). Punter’s omission of Wordsworth from his study implies that Wordsworth, unlike his contemporaries, has no ties to the gothic tradition, at least none worthy of scholarly attention. I have singled out Punter, but his dismissal of the gothic elements in Wordsworth’s work is the norm, not the exception, among contemporary scholars. Instead of acknowledging the obviously supernatural qualities of Wordsworth’s verse, scholars tend to take Wordsworth at his philosophical word, at the cost of productive inquiry into what is obviously a complex relationship fraught with contradiction.
With that in mind, this thesis will lay out some connections between Wordsworth and the gothic, connections that seem most striking to me and most important to the larger task of understanding the complex yet undertreated relationship between these two literary forces. To this end, we will examine some of Wordsworth’s more gothic texts in an attempt to make sense of the presence of gothic material in the poetry of a man that detested the gothic. By doing so, we discover that Wordsworth’s use of the gothic mode is inextricably linked to his unique position as a troubled mourner, that is, one who has suffered inexorable loss and has come to a stopping point in the process of mourning.

Wordsworth’s early failure to mourn the loss of his father properly, as we shall see, put him in a position to understand the psychological ramifications of troubled mourning, such as the imagination’s tendency to present spectral images of the object of grief in one’s surroundings. The Prelude provides ample evidence that Wordsworth was haunted by spectral images of his deceased father. In Mourning and Melancholia Freud described how the reluctance to give up the dead might result in such projections. According to Freud, individuals might cling to lost objects through acts of “hallucinatory wishful psychosis”—that is to say that those in mourning are likely to see ghosts, as this is symptomatic of deep loss (244). Wordsworth was defined by his identity as a mourner, and, in turn, he wrote about characters that mourned. As a result, his poetry often features mourners haunted by spectral images, which account, as we shall see, for a great deal of the gothicism contained within his poetry. As a man who
explored his own irrevocable loss again and again through verse, Wordsworth’s poetry simply could not contain his concerns without tapping into the gothic.

While this study builds from the assertion that Wordsworth deploys the gothic mode within his poetry, it is important for me to define the limits of my claim. Let it be understood that by using Sedgwick’s definition of the gothic, I in no way argue that Wordsworth’s poetry is wholly “gothic,” but rather that he takes up the gothic mode at certain critical moments within his poetry, altering the traditional gothic mode by representing supernatural phenomena as a natural byproduct of the mourning imagination.
William Wordsworth was born on April 7, 1770, to John and Ann Wordsworth in the small Lake District town of Cockermouth. Supernatural tales were an integral part of folk culture in the lake towns where Wordsworth spent his childhood. He would have known of Colgarth Hall on the banks of Windemere, and the two human skulls in one of its windows, which, as Thomas West reported in his Guide to the Lakes (1784), had been brought to the house by a ghost (Wordsworth 3). He would have also been aware of the “tall, white-robed female” who was supposed to “[walk] regularly on the road between Belmount Avenue and Hawkshead Hall, or in Scarhouse Lane” (Cowper 327). These tales, and others like them, were a part of the cultural atmosphere in which Wordsworth grew up, and it is likely that he believed in ghosts (Wordsworth 3).

After his mother’s death in March of 1778, Wordsworth was sent to Hawkshead to attend school, and it was here that he was exposed to the literature and encouragement that would facilitate his development into one of the greatest poets the world has ever known. Wordsworth’s teachers, William Taylor, and his successor, Thomas Bowman, provided Wordsworth with the work of poets such as James Beattie, Helen Maria Williams, and Charlotte Smith. Wordsworth also read works by graveyard poets such as Robert Blair and Edward Young, and with these influences began to practice his own hand at gothic poems, elegies, elegiac idylls, epitaphs, and mournful narratives (Earliest Poems ix). His first published poem, “Sonnet, on Seeing Helen Maria Williams Weep at a Tale of Distress” (1787) recounts the poet’s chilling reuni
with a “wand’ring wretch,” during which “Life left my loaded heart, and closing eye” 
(Earliest Poems 10). Even at this early stage of his profession as a poet, we find 
Wordsworth experimenting with supernatural themes and emulating the gothic poetry to which he has been exposed.

All of this reading and imitation of the gothic mode prepared Wordsworth to 
pen the longest and most ambitious poem of his youth, The Vale of Esthwaite. Written 
in 1787 when he was seventeen years old and about to depart for Cambridge, this poem was first published in the 1940s and has only begun to receive its critical due. The poem’s manuscript presents considerable problems to its editors as it exists only in fragmentary state and has a tremendously disjointed narrative structure. Like Duncan 
Wu, I will treat the poem as having three fragments, the third fragment markedly 
different from the first two. Fragments one and two were composed March-June 1787 
and depict a gothic fantasy, while fragment three was likely composed in July 1797 and 
comprises a deeply personal paternal elegy.

Fragments one and two tell a tale in which a mysterious and grotesque ghost 
leads Wordsworth from a “lonely gothic mansion” into “black Helvellyn’s inmost 
womb,” where he is initiated into “the world of shades.” Because Wordsworth’s intent was to scare his reader, these fragments are replete with the full range of gothic 
elements. James Averill comments:

The poem abounds with the quaint apparatus of Gothicism: it is the 
world of Otranto and Williams’ “Irregular Fragment,” replete with 
skeletal “spectres,” “moaning owls,” “haunted castles,” coffers marked
with blood, “Murder” and “Suicide”…The Vale of Esthwaite continually refers to such high-pitched emotional states as Fear, Horror, and Terror.

(46)

Indeed, these fragments are so weighed down by gothic motif one finds it difficult to maintain a sense of plot. What becomes clear is that at the end of this gothic journey the poet has undergone ceremonious rite of passage. The ghost waves his hand around the poet’s head three times—“While thrice in circles slow and dread / He waved his hand around my head”—before they enter into Helvellyn’s abyss. The ensuing change is described:

Full oft together are we hurl’d
Far Far amid the shadowy world—
And since that hour the world unknown,
The world of shades, is all my own. (142-5)

As a result of this descent, the poet’s relationship to the “world of shades” has changed from that of outsider to insider—Wordsworth has achieved an uncanny fellowship with the dead.

Scholars tend to overlook the first two fragments of this poem, summarizing their importance only by noting that they are exercises in juvenile imitation. Having dismissed fragments one and two, they focus on fragment three, treating it almost as a separate poem where biographical clues are more plentiful. The Vale’s third fragment was composed weeks or months later, around July 1787, and bears no resemblance to it’s the earlier fragments. For fragment three, Wordsworth quits his gothic plot and
turns inward, reflectively analyzing his feelings about the loss of his father three and a half years earlier. Wu has discussed this dramatic shift in style and subject matter, noting that “Between the first period of composition (March-June 1787) and the second (July 1787), some change occurred within him that turned the ‘Vale’ from a literary exercise into something more personal” (Wordsworth 7). The change that occurred within Wordsworth is the result of what Wu terms “the emotional crisis of July 1787.”

In July of 1787, immediately before Wordsworth penned fragment three, he found himself in Hawkshead, anxiously awaiting the arrival of horses that would carry him to see Dorothy at their aunt’s home in Penrith. This experience was all too reminiscent of his experience three and a half years prior wherein he anxiously awaited the arrival of horses to carry him to Cockermouth, where his father would die just eleven days later. Waiting for the horses this second time brought back the memory of his father’s death, and fragment three of The Vale provided Wordsworth with a space to make sense of his feelings. Here, he reflects for the first time on his own failure to mourn his father’s death three and half years prior:

Long Long upon yon steepy rock

Alone I bore the bitter shock

Long Long my swimming eyes did roam

For little horse to bear me home

To bear me what avails my tear

To sorrow o’er a father’s bier.

Flow on, in vain thou hast not flow’d
But eas’d me of a heavy load
For much it gives my soul relief
To pay the mighty debt of grief
With sighs repeated o’er and o’er
I mourn because I mourn’d no more.
For ah! The storm was soon at rest—
Soon broke the Sun upon my breast. (7-20)

This passage is not about John Wordsworth’s death, but is rather about Wordsworth’s delayed mourning of his death. The emotional crisis of 1787 allowed Wordsworth to return to the abandoned task of mourning for his father. Only by returning to a situation resembling that of his earlier tragedy has he become poised to “pay the mighty debt of grief.” The emotional crisis of 1787 accounts for the incongruousness of The Vale’s fragments and serves as a motive for Wordsworth to write the lines that constitute his first attempts at poetry of personal mourning.

Instead of dwelling on the contrast between this introspective fragment the heavily gothic fragments it follows, we might benefit from exploring some parallels. At the most fundamental level, all three fragments center on trauma resulting from the dead’s sudden presence in Wordsworth’s life. The deceased found in fragments one and two are frightening because they are undead—above ground when they should be buried, present when they should be absent, wielding control over Wordsworth when they should have none. Similarly, the third fragment’s retelling of a “bitter shock” results in the realization that the deceased, in this case John Wordsworth, has not been
properly mourned and is therefore present in Wordsworth’s thoughts, capable of controlling his emotions, and unburied from his place as a repressed memory of unfathomable loss.

In this sense, both plots center on the dead’s shocking influence over the living. As a result, it becomes especially significant that in *The Vale* Wordsworth tries in vain to abandon his underworld journey, just as he has historically avoided his introspective, psychological journey inward to examine his feelings about his paternal loss. He tries to flee from the specter “with arms in horror spread around” only to have some “form unseen/ twist round my hand an icy chain/and drag me to the spot again.” This ghost can be escaped, but only temporarily—and the same is true for Wordsworth’s repressed grief. Wordsworth might have believed that his emotional “storm” would be at rest forever, but he could not exempt himself from the important work of mourning any more than he could overcome the will of his ghostly captor.

With the acknowledgement that this introspective, autobiographical fragment follows some of Wordsworth’s most dark and gothic verse, we might speculate that the emotional crisis of 1787 was not solely responsible for Wordsworth’s emotional breakthrough. We might add that writing in the gothic mode about ghosts and phantoms was Wordsworth’s way of approaching the topic of death obliquely, and placed Wordsworth in touch with the tragic emotions and darker state of mind in and from which he could finally grieve his paternal loss. Wu acknowledges that the deaths of Wordsworth’s parents led him “to the graveyard poets (such as Blair and Young) and
the fashionable mode of the gothic” (Earliest Poems ix). The gothic mode, in turn, positioned Wordsworth to confront those losses.
A favorite trope of the early gothic novel is that of the haunting father figure. In Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto*, Manfred and his family are terrorized by supernatural events as a result of his displacement of Otranto’s rightful ruling father. In Ann Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, Emily sees spectral images of her father long after his death. In Matthew Lewis’s *The Monk*, ecclesiastic fatherhood seems to be a pre-condition for sinister behavior, and both religious and genetic fatherhood combine in Radcliffe’s *The Italian*, in which Schedoni, a monk, seeks to murder a girl he comes to believe is his daughter. At the same time, the early gothic novel’s consistent interest in the topics of tyrannical fatherhood, legacy, and legitimacy can be viewed as a literary articulation of the social concerns surrounding the French Revolution.

Like these gothic novels, Wordsworth’s verse frequently includes haunting fathers or paternal figures that encroach upon the world of the living even after they have died. The most important example is found in *The Prelude*, where Wordsworth reports his feelings of guilt about his father’s death, and continues to remember several childhood experiences that have been imaginatively transformed, either at the time of the experience or the later time of poetic recollection, into terrifying scenes of paternal vengeance. *The Prelude*, as autobiography, shows that Wordsworth was, in a very real sense, psychologically haunted by his deceased father. Perhaps as a result of his personal experiences with paternal loss, troubled mourning, and their seemingly supernatural consequences, many of Wordsworth’s shorter, fictional works represent
the disappearance of the father as the impetus for supernatural occurrences. Poems such as “The Ruined Cottage,” “The Thorn,” and “The Mad Mother” allowed Wordsworth to reiterate his own experience of paternal abandonment and subsequent haunting.

Wordsworth’s father, John Wordsworth, died on December 30, 1783, when Wordsworth was just thirteen years old. Critics such as Wu have argued that this early paternal loss had a significant influence on both Wordsworth and his writing.³ Wordsworth’s most widely-cited recollection of this event is found in The Prelude and is a reworking of fragment three of The Vale of Esthwaite, which we have just discussed. Here, Wordsworth’s primary concern is no longer delayed grief—“I mourn because I mourn’d no more”—but instead the guilty feelings he associates with his father’s death. He writes in book one of the 1799 Prelude:

The day before the holidays began,

Feverish, and tired, and restless, I went forth

Into the fields, impatient for the sight

Of those three horses which should bear us home,

My brothers and myself. There was a crag,

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³ Duncan Wu’s Wordsworth: An Inner Life treats Wordsworth’s paternal loss as one of his most important experiences that shaped his creative power. He writes, “The death a burial of their father in 1783 had been intensely traumatic; on top of which it made the children destitute, as he left no will and no money. No doubt these factors played their part in detaining the children from confronting the emotional consequences of the events that had disrupted their lives, and the result was acute feelings of guilt, particularly in Wordsworth, that would shape his creative work from this point onwards” (x).
An eminence, which from the meeting-point
Of two highways ascending overlooked
At least a long half-mile of those two roads,
By each of which the expected steeds might come—
The choice uncertain. Thither I repaired
Up to the highest summit. ‘Twas a day
Stormy, and rough, and wild, and on the grass
I sate half sheltered by a naked wall.
Upon my right hand was a single sheep,
A whistling hawthorn on my left, and there,
Those two companions at my side, I watched
With my eyes intensely straining, as the mist
Gave intermitting prospects of the wood
And plain beneath. Ere to school I returned
That dreary time, ere I had been 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. The event
With all the sorrow which it brought, appeared
A chastisement; and when I called to mind
That day so lately passed, when from the crag
I looked in such anxiety of hope,
With trite reflections of morality,
Yet with the deepest passion, I bowed low
To God who thus corrected my desires.
And afterwards the wind and sleety rain,
And all the business of the elements,
The single sheep, and the one blasted tree,
And the bleak music of that old stone wall,
The noise of wood and water, and the mist
Which on the line of each of those two roads
Advanced in such indisputable shapes—
All these were spectacles and sounds to which
I often would repair, and thence would drink
As at a fountain. And I do not doubt
That in this later time, when storm and rain
Beat on my roof at midnight, or by day
When I am in the woods, unknown to me
The workings of my spirit thence are brought.

(345-74)

The stormy night Wordsworth relives is December 19, 1783, when he waited with his brothers, John and Richard, for the horses that were to carry them home from Hawkshead for the Christmas holiday (*Prelude* 10). Tragically, the boys’ father would die just eleven days later. Yet this event, which has been neatly summarized in two
words—“he died”—is not the true subject of this passage. Instead, it centers on Wordsworth’s guilt and personal conviction that he has killed his father by looking forward to the Christmas holiday too eagerly. Wu notes that this passage “turns his father’s death into divine punishment” and Wordsworth “into his father’s murderer” (Wordsworth 131). The story he tells is one of crime and punishment; Wordsworth’s crimes are his “anxiety of hope” and his “trite reflections of morality” for which God has punished him, correcting his desires by taking his father’s life. Sadly, nowhere does Wordsworth, writing at age twenty-nine, indicate that this was not actually the case. On the contrary, he explains that this memory returns to him again and again even in “this later time,” leaving the reader to infer that his feelings of guilt associated with this memory return as well.

Critics have long been drawn to the Oedipal aspects of this passage. Eugene Stelzig explains Wordsworth’s self-blame saying, “In that irrational emotion there is both a residue of infantile narcissism—the adolescent boy’s ‘desires’ brought about the dire event—as well as an element of Oedipal guilt: the father dies, the son’s wishes are at once fulfilled and chastised by a God (the Father?) hardly ever invoked in The Prelude” (536-7). If the “desires” God corrects include the hope that his father will perish, we might ask ourselves why Wordsworth would harbor such desires. Stelzig speculates that they stem from the ill treatment he and his siblings received after their mother’s death. Keith Hanley also acknowledges the possibility that Wordsworth desired his father’s death on some level, reminding us that John Wordsworth “had in fact been an absent father for most of the poet’s life. He was a distant figure who, as
land-steward and law-agent to the unpopular local magnate, the Earl of Lonsdale, had constantly to travel away on business” (72). Regardless of the validity of these speculations, it is clear that Wordsworth remembers his father’s death as a tragedy for which he is culpable, and that the guilt he associates with the event continues to plague him even in adulthood. This guilt, and the attendant fear that his father will somehow assert retributive justice, allows John Wordsworth to become a haunting figure in Wordsworth’s life and, consequently, *The Prelude*. If John Wordsworth seems enigmatically absent from the waiting for the horses episode (again, his death is summed up in two words—“he died”) he is discernibly present in Wordsworth’s other spots of time—in the stealing of the boat and the drowned man of Esthwaite episodes in particular. In each of these spots of time, Wordsworth imaginatively confronts the ghost of his deceased father while forcing his reader to do the same. John Wordsworth encroaches on Wordsworth’s imagination and verse, ultimately infusing *The Prelude* with a palpable supernatural quality.

Ronald Paulson, in his book *Representations of Revolution*, was probably the first critic to explore the extent to which John Wordsworth is the repressed subject of *The Prelude* that “keeps cropping up in one form or another in the spots of time” (269). Paulson argues, “Every spot of time he recounts connects in one way or another with a looming, uprisen figure of terror and the unknown, one dispossessed or killed, with whom a crime or guilt of some sort connects Wordsworth” (259). In light of Paulson’s work, let us consider John Wordsworth’s presence in the stealing of the boat and drowned man of Esthwaite episodes to begin a larger analysis of how his haunting
presence in *The Prelude* associates the text with gothic novels that frequently used the haunting father trope, albeit with many key differences.

In the stealing of the boat episode Wordsworth takes a shepherd’s skiff from the cave that is “its usual home” and rows upstream “bent on speed.” Aware of his wrongdoing, he calls this “an act of stealth / And troubled pleasure.” He writes in book one of the 1799 *Prelude*:

> When, from behind that rocky steep, till then
> The bound of the horizon, a huge cliff,
> As if with voluntary power instinct,
> Upreared its head. I struck, and struck again,
> And, growing still in stature, the huge cliff
> Rose up between me and the stars, and still,
> With measured motion, like a living thing
> Strode after me. (107-14)

Like the waiting for the horses passage, this spot of time tells a story of crime and punishment, or the assertion of the boy’s will followed by a perceived chastisement.

The mountain rises up “like a living thing,” pursuing the young thief as if it seeks to hold him accountable for his crime. Wordsworth has made clear that the memory of his father’s death often returns to him without cause—“unknown to me”—and the memory returns to him during this experience because it produces guilt, an emotion forever associated with his father’s death. Wordsworth anthropomorphizes the cliff, imaginatively allowing it to seek the vengeance his dead father cannot. In both
the waiting for the horses and the stealing of the boat passages, Wordsworth sees a cause and effect relationship where there really is none—he believes that the mountain has risen up because he has stolen the boat, just as he believed that God took his father’s life because he looked forward to the Christmas holiday too eagerly. These distinct parallels prohibit us from treating this episode as merely the exposition of a child’s imagination fueled by the grandeur of his surroundings.

Long after returning the stolen boat, he remains deeply affected by his adventure and exhibits the symptoms of someone who has undergone a supernatural encounter:

And through the meadows homeward went with grave
And serious thoughts; and after I had seen
That spectacle, for many days my brain
Worked with a dim and undetermined sense
Of unknown modes of being. In my thoughts
There was a darkness—call it solitude
Or blank desertion; no familiar shapes
Of hourly objects, images of trees,
Of sea or sky, no colours of green fields,
But huge and mighty forms that do not live
Like living men moved slowly through my mind
By day, and were the trouble of my dreams.

(118-29)
Newly aware of “unknown modes of being,” the experience has awakened in Wordsworth a sense of the numinous—of invisible forces at work in the world. Most frightening, perhaps, are the “huge and mighty forms that do not live like living men” that invade the child’s mind, just as John Wordsworth has invaded the child’s natural surroundings, and ultimately the adult’s verse.

I regard the drowned man of Esthwaite passage as yet another example of John Wordsworth’s haunting presence in *The Prelude*. Young William waits on the shore as members of his community extract a corpse from Esthwaite water:

I saw distinctly on the opposite shore,
Beneath a tree and close by the lake side,
A heap of garments, as if left by one
Who there was batting. Half an hour I watched
And no one owned them; meanwhile the calm lake
Grew dark with all the shadows on its breast,
And now and then a leaping fish disturbed
The breathless stillness. The succeeding day
There came a company, and in their boat
Sounded with iron hooks and with long poles.
At length the dead man, ’mid that beauteous scene
Of trees and hills and water, bolt upright
Rose with his ghastly face.

(1799, I, 267-79)
When the nine year-old Wordsworth sees the corpse “bolt upright,” he has been waiting on the shore a considerable amount of time; he has waited throughout one evening and his curiosity has brought him back the following morning. Therefore, the experience is structurally similar to that of waiting for the horses in that each involved a long period of suspense followed by a jarring confrontation with mortality. The experiences are also similar in that they both call into question Wordsworth’s capacity to take morbid pleasure in the deaths of others. The child fears that his desires caused his father’s death, just as he seems to take voyeuristic pleasure in awaiting the corpse’s retrieval.

The surfacing of “the dead man” is another instance wherein John Wordsworth, who is submerged in Wordsworth’s unconscious, manifests himself to the alarm of both Wordsworth and his reader. To an ordinary person this event might have been startling, but for Wordsworth, who believes he has indirectly murdered his father, the event has been imaginatively changed into a chilling confrontation with the undead. By Wordsworth’s account, the drowned man “bolt upright,” as if to suggest that he has risen from the water independent of aid. The 1805 reworking further emphasizes the ghostly nature of this encounter, describing the drowned man as “a spectre shape—/ Of terror even” (V, 472-3).

Both the stealing of the boat and the drowned man of Esthwaite spots of time elicit fear and include supernatural subject matter, independent of our recognition of the paternal haunting occurring just beneath the textual surface. When we recognize John Wordsworth as the force behind Wordsworth’s memories and the poetry that recounts them, we realize that The Prelude, like its author, is recognizably haunted by this
deceased father. Just as the cliff “rose up” and the drowned man “bolt upright,” John Wordsworth repeatedly pops up in the text. Yet scholars seem unwilling to discuss the gothic elements of these spots of time and others, viewing them strictly as commentary on the creative powers of the imagination. Jonathan Wordsworth writes that in the spots of time “Wordsworth portrays, or evokes, moods that are very closely analogous to the supernatural, but which never in fact crosses the borderline” (*Prelude* 576).

Where is this borderline? To be clear, these portions of *The Prelude* evoke supernatural moods, but also contain traces of the gothic mode Wordsworth is so often said to have abandoned.

Moreover, because *The Prelude* is haunted by a paternal figure, it is thematically connected to many prominent gothic novels of Wordsworth’s time. For instance, Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) centers on the usurpation of a nation’s rightful ruling father, and a series of supernatural events leading to the eventual restitution of his dynasty. Manfred has “usurped from the said Lord Frederic, the nearest of blood to the last rightful lord Alfonso the Good” and Manfred and his children are terrorized by enormous relics of the ousted king (61). Robert Miles identifies revenge of the overthrown father as the central theme of the work, viewing the sudden appearance of Alfonso’s helmet, glove, and sword, as “towering metonyms of his ancient authority.” He adds that in *Otranto* “The shadow of the ur-father haunts events, Otranto finally collapsing, and the story ending, with his reembodiment. Repressed images of Alfonso shadow the castle, flickering back to disastrous life, even as they do in the citadel of

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4 See Miles chapter 5.
Manfred’s mind” (103). Just as Wordsworth’s father haunts *The Prelude*, manifesting himself in the forms cliffs and corpses, so is Manfred haunted by worldly representations of the father he has overthrown. In both *The Prelude* and *The Castle of Otranto* the displacement of the father seems to be the precursor to supernatural occurrence. Looking beyond *The Prelude*, we see that many of Wordsworth’s other poems bear the same narrative structure. To make this point, I look to “The Ruined Cottage,” “The Thorn,” and “The Mad Mother.” These poems also comprise narratives in which paternal disappearance incites supernatural occurrence, but unlike *The Prelude* the human emotion affecting the abandoned is not guilt but stagnant grief. The haunting father figures in these poems are very different than that of John Wordsworth in *The Prelude*: these haunting fathers are not pursuers of the guilty, but as abandoners, they themselves are the guilty.

In “The Ruined Cottage” the aged peddler recalls that in former times Margaret and Robert “passed their days / In peace and comfort.” Yet when Robert disappears Margaret’s troubled mourning transforms her into a ghostly figure that is unable to care for their two children, who also eventually die. Her troubled mourning, which is at the heart of this poem, is the result of her inability to categorize Robert definitively as either living or dead. Because she has reason to suspect he has enlisted in the military, she can regard the loss as neither temporary nor permanent—“If he lived, she knew not that he lived: if he were dead, she knew not he was dead.” This uncertainty about Robert’s status leads to Margaret’s own transformation into a liminal figure, hovering
apparition-like somewhere between life and death. She haunts both her home and Wordsworth’s reader.

Upon losing her family, Margaret becomes strangely unlife-like; she is neither human nor corpse, but something in between. Karen Swann points out that Wordsworth’s narrative “works to transform her human body into an eerily inspired simulacrum of a body—or, in more tendentious words, into a gothic spirit” (85). The peddler sees her appear at the stroke of the hour:

The house-clock struck eight:

I turned and saw her distant a few steps.

Her face was pale and thin, her figure too

Was changed. (345-8)

As physically wasted as the home she neglects, Margaret stalks her property, nearly unrecognizable as a living being. Yet if the bereaved Margaret seems like a “gothic spirit,” it is not only because of her changed appearance. Margaret imagines herself as immortal, as if her own never-ending grief over another’s death has made her impervious to her own. She tells the peddler, “my tears / have flowed as if my body were not such / As others are, and I could never die.” When Margaret finally dies, alone and profoundly miserable, the peddler intimates that she could be revived by the return of Robert, albeit as something only approximately human. He remembers Margaret as:

A human being destined to awake

To human life, or something very near
To human life, when he shall come again
For whom she suffered. (372-5)

Margaret’s appearance, behavior, and description as immortal, combined with the suggestion that she might yet be raised from the dead, result in confusion about her true status. Because she seems neither alive nor dead, but always both, she reminds us of many traditional undead gothic figures.

Adding to the supernatural mood of the poem, Robert’s disappearance also prompts Margaret to see spectral images. More than five years after Robert’s disappearance she spends “the idle length of half a Sabbath day” staring at the woods, seeing him when he is not physically present. The peddler recalls how:

On this old Bench
For hours she sate, and evermore her eye
Was busy in the distance, shaping things
Which made her heart beat quick. (454-7)

This returns us to the Freudian notion that those in mourning are prone to cope by “clinging to the object through the medium of a hallucinatory wishful psychosis.” Margaret’s mind is “shaping things” because she has not accepted that her husband is dead. Margaret has transformed into a gothic figure able to see spectral images only after Robert’s disappearance and death.

In recognizing the gothic mode within “The Ruined Cottage,” we find ourselves in good company. Wordsworth himself was aware of how similar this poem seemed to the sensational literature he deplored, as evidenced by his attempts to distance himself
from the poem’s subject matter. Critics such as Swann have written on the importance of Wordsworth’s use of the peddler as narrator as a means of such distancing.\(^5\) It is the peddler, not Wordsworth, who delivers “a tale that raises the dead and makes the youth’s blood run cold” (83). He has his peddler pause during his tale to iterate a defense of his own project:

\begin{quote}
It were a wantonness, and would demand  
Severe reproof, if we were men whose hearts  
Could hold vain dalliance with the misery  
Even of the dead; contented thence to draw  
A momentary pleasure, never marked  
By reason, barren of all future good.  
But we have known that there is often found  
In mournful thoughts, and always might be found,  
A power to virtue friendly; were't not so,  
I am a dreamer among men—indeed  
An idle dreamer! 'Tis a common tale,  
By moving accidents uncharactered,  
A tale of silent suffering, hardly clothed  
In bodily form, and to the grosser sense  
But ill adapted, scarcely palpable  
To him who does not think. (280-95)
\end{quote}

\(^5\) See Karen Swann’s *Suffering and Sensation in The Ruined Cottage*. 
The peddler’s words are meant to characterize Wordsworth’s poem as food for virtuous thought, not to be misunderstood as poetry aimed to produce pleasure from the description of monumental suffering—a key characteristic of gothic literature. Wordsworth would remark on such “vain dalliance” and “wantonness” directly in the 1800 Preface, attacking the desire for “violent stimulants” and “craving for extraordinary incident.” Wordsworth uses the peddler to distance himself from the story and to excuse its sensationalism because he himself recognizes his poem’s resemblance to gothic material.

“The Thorn,” Wordsworth’s first major undertaking after “The Ruined Cottage,” also transforms from a rustic tale into a supernatural mystery after a father’s disappearance. When Stephen Hill abandons Martha Ray to wed another maid, she is launched into a grief from which she never recovers. Like Margaret, Martha becomes apparition-like, haunting the location of her trauma, repeating her doleful cry, “Oh woe is me! Oh misery!” His disappearance results in the dark mystery of “The Thorn,” the unknown fate of Martha’s child. We are told “She was with child and she was mad” but then later “what became of this poor child / There’s none that ever knew” (157-8). The mysterious disappearance of this infant seems to be the direct result of its father’s desertion. The townspeople, along with the reader, must speculate about what has become of this child, and whether it was born to its grieving mother “alive or dead.” Wordsworth even implies that the loss of Stephen has driven Martha to infanticide by suggesting that the “moss is spotted red / With drops of that poor infant's blood.”
Not only does the paternal abandonment result in a chilling mystery (whether or not a murder has taken place), but it also marks the point at which the dead begin to encroach upon the world of the living. After Stephen’s disappearance the churchyard begins to echo with “voices of the dead” and the natural surroundings become haunted by the child:

    Some say, if to the pond you go,
    And fix on it a steady view,
    The shadow of a babe you trace,
    A baby and a baby's face,
    And that it looks at you;
    Whene'er you look on it, 'tis plain
    The baby looks at you again. (225-31)

In “The Thorn” it is not the absent father that haunts, but instead his abandoned child, whose status as living or dead has become disturbingly debatable.

    Similarly, in “The Mad Mother,” the father has abandoned his infant and its mother, who laments, “Thy father cares not for my breast,” adding, “I’ve sought thy father far and wide.” Her condition degenerates into madness as she begins to hallucinate while breastfeeding, imagining that “fiendish faces one two three / Hung at my breasts and pulled at me.” In the father’s absence, the ordinarily peaceful scene of a mother feeding her child has become a scene of supernatural terror. This brings to mind Agnes, in Lewis’s The Monk, who in the absence of a father, delivers the baby alone, watches it die, and crazed with anguish, finally cherishes its putrefying body.
Wordsworth knew the pain of a father’s abandonment firsthand, and these poems of paternal loss allowed him to suffer with and through these characters. *The Prelude* shows that Wordsworth also knew what it meant to be psychologically haunted by paternal loss, and these poems and their gothic elements to some extent reflect Wordsworth’s own experience. At the same time, we must remember that Wordsworth himself was an absent father.

In 1792, Wordsworth fathered the child of a French woman four years older than himself, only to abandon them both. Because Wordsworth recorded very little about his relationship with Annette Vallon, biographers have been forced to speculate about the course of events leading to her pregnancy. What we do know is “Anne-Caroline Wordsworth was born on 15 December 1792 and by the end of the month her father was back in London” (Gill 58). While critics disagree about Wordsworth’s personal feelings about Annette, it is clear that she “expected that he would marry her in due course.” This would never happen and, sadly, Wordsworth would visit Annette and Caroline only a few times during the course of his life, including his visit in 1802 just before his own marriage to Mary Hutchinson. There is no doubt that after the birth if their child, Annette longed desperately for Wordsworth’s return. She writes on March 20, 1793:

Come, my love, my husband, and receive the tender embraces of your wife, of your daughter…She grows more like you every day. I seem to be holding you in my arms. Her little heart often beats against my own; I seem to feel her father’s: but why, Caroline, are you so insensible?
Why does not your heart stir when your mother’s is beating so? O my beloved, soon it will be stirred when I shall say to her: ‘Caroline, in a month, in a fortnight, in a week, you are going to see the most beloved of men, the most tender of men.’ Then my Caroline’s heart will be moved, she will feel her first emotion and it will be of love of her father. (qtd. Gill 66)

This letter bears all the tragedy of the poems of abandonment we have just examined. Wordsworth’s awareness of Annette’s desperation even suggests that figures such as Margaret, Martha Ray, and the Mad Mother might have been informed by her response to his desertion. It is clear not only that Annette longed despondently for Wordsworth, but also that she was haunted by his image during his perpetual absence. She writes to Dorothy:

His image follows me everywhere; often when I am alone in my room with his letters I think he has entered… emerging from my mistake as from a dream I see him not, the father of my child; he is very far from me. This scene if often repeated and throws me into extreme melancholy. (qtd. Gill 65)

If Wordsworth’s poetry depicts troubled mourning as the cause of supernatural phenomena, we might trace this back to his own unfortunate case study with Annette Vallon.

This section of my study has exposed the extent to which Wordsworth took up the gothic theme of paternal haunting, but we must add that Wordsworth has adapted
this theme in significant ways. It is critical to note that John Wordsworth haunts his son psychologically, and *The Prelude*, as an autobiographical poem, is haunted in much the same manner. In the gothic novels, characters are continually acted upon by outward, supernatural forces they cannot control—the enormous relics Walpole shoehorns into the scenery are “real.” For Wordsworth, the human imagination, especially under the strain of loss, is the source of the supernatural.
Ann Radcliffe’s gothic novel *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) is remembered primarily for its author’s use of the “explained supernatural,” a device through which the alarming and formidable occurrences that have accumulated over a span of nearly 700 pages turn out to have rational explanations. Strange music, groaning walls, apparitions, the inexplicable disappearance of characters, and the movement of a dead body are all explained by the conclusion of the novel, effectively eliminating the supernatural from Radcliffe’s fictional world.

However, as Terry Castle points out, what remains unexplained are the imaginative capabilities of her main characters, who are able to conjure the dead and absent through efforts of the imagination. Castle writes that in *Udolpho*:

> Old-fashioned ghosts, it is true, have disappeared from the fictional world, but a new kind of apparition takes their place. To be a Radcliffian hero or heroine in one sense means just this: to be ‘haunted’ by the spectral mental images of those one loves. One sees in the mind’s eye those who are absent; one is befriended and consoled by ‘phantoms’ of the beloved. (*Thermometer* 123)

Unlike the “ghosts” that terrorize the characters elsewhere in the novel, these phantoms are both desired and welcomed. In *Udolpho* we often find characters dwelling in spaces associated with those they mourn, and surrounding themselves with

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6 See Terry Castle, “The Specralization of the Other in The Mysteries of Udolpho” 121.
what Castle calls “souvenirs of the other” in order to conjure the image of the deceased or absent (Thermometer 125).

When Madame St. Aubert dies, for instance, her husband is reluctant to quit his home because “the presence of his wife had sanctified every surrounding scene” and prompts visions of her (22). Emily does not depart after her parents’ deaths for the same reason, wishing to remain in the place “rendered infinitely dear to her, as the late residence of those, whom she had lost forever, where she could weep unobserved, retrace their steps, and remember each minute particular of their manners” (98). La Vallée becomes a place where Emily seeks to be haunted, where she might walk “beneath the groves, which her father had planted,” where “his countenance, his smile, even the accents of his voice, returned with exactness to her fancy, and her heart melted to the tender recollections” (592). In Udolpho places, and also objects, conjure images of the lost beloved. Emily shrinks when she sees her late father’s armchair “for she had so often seen him seated there, and the idea of him rose so distinctly to her mind, that she almost fancied she saw him before her” (95). Similarly, reading Valancourt’s book and “dwelling on the passages, which he had admired” allows Emily to summon her lost lover “to her presence again” (58).

Castle argues that while Radcliffe’s conclusion aims to account for all of the supernatural events of the novel, it does nothing to explain the hauntings brought forth by her bereaved character’s own imaginations. Radcliffe presents the human imagination as having the ability to project images of the dead or absent, what Castle terms the “spectralization of the other” (120). She argues that Radcliffe’s
“preoccupation with the notion that the dead are not really dead” can be read as a symptom of an increasingly common public refusal to accept death as a finite end to life. Castle’s historical contextualization of projecting images of the dead helps us not only to understand Radcliffe’s representation of the dead as accessible, but also Wordsworth’s.

She proposes that Radcliffe’s “irrational cognitive practice” of “obsessional concentration on nostalgic images of the dead” reflects the late eighteenth century’s growing fear of and subsequent denial of death (133). To make this point, Castle cites Philippe Ariés, who has researched European attitudes towards death and dying since the Middle Ages. Ariés finds that the late eighteenth-century marks a shift from a corporeal understanding of human existence to a spiritual conceptualization of human experience. He traces the cause of this public denial of death as a finite break from life to the period’s obsession with “the beautiful death,” which involved “hiding or denying the physical signs of mortality and decay,” and a growing fascination with idealized images of the deceased (Castle 130-1).

Even acknowledging Wordsworth’s distaste for Radcliffe’s novels, we might note a commonality between these writers: each depicts worlds wherein the dead remain accessible to the living through the powers of the mourning imagination. For example, in Wordsworth’s juvenile poem “The Dog: An Idyllium” (1786-7) the poet

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7 Quincey records that Wordsworth had read Radcliffe: “One of Mrs. Radcliffe’s romances, viz. ‘The Italian,’ he had, by some strange accident, read, read, but only to laugh at it.” It is likely that Wordsworth read Coleridge’s copy, who had lately been reviewing it. Wordsworth would eventually profess scorn for “that want of taste, which is universal among modern novels of the Radcliffe school” (Readings 115-6).
imaginatively conjures Ann Tyson’s dead dog back to life, and the two are consequently reunited as “the happiest pair on earth.” He gazes across the water in which the dog drowned:

While I gazed (to Nature blind)
On the calm Ocean of my mind
Some new-created image rose
In full grown-beauty at its birth
Lovely as venus from the sea
Then, while my glad hand sprung to thee,
We were the happiest pair on earth! (18-24)

What Wordsworth describes is not merely an act of remembrance. This “new-created image” does not rise in his mind exclusively, but also, we are lead to believe, in the real world. The simile “Lovely as a venus from the sea” constructs imagery of the dead animal rising from the lake before Wordsworth’s eyes. Even the physical terms of their interaction—“my glad hand sprung to thee”—assures us that this conjured dog can not only be seen but also touched. Later, Wordsworth does not view this poem as a childish fancy, but expands it for use in the 1805 Prelude:

A hundred times when, in these wanderings,
I have been busy with the toil of verse,
Great pains and little progress, and at once
Some fair enchanting image in my mind
Rose up, full-form’d, like Venus from the sea,
Have I sprung forth towards him, and let loose
My hand upon his back with a stormy joy,
Caressing him again, and yet again. (IV, 101-8)

This dog, decades after its death, is conjured into the world of the living by
Wordsworth’s mourning imagination.

For Radcliffe and Wordsworth, ghosts are not merely the wandering souls of the
nameless dead but also imagined images of the mourned that are projected outward
with uncanny vividness. Both depict the grieving psyche’s ability to project images of
the grieved. Freud describes this very phenomenon in *Mourning and Melancholia*.
According to Freud, an individual might resist the separation between themselves and
the one they have lost:

This opposition can be so intense that a turning away from reality takes
place and a clinging to the object through the medium of a hallucinatory
wishful psychosis. Normally, respect for reality gains the day.
Nevertheless its orders cannot be obeyed at once. They are carried out
bit by bit, at great expense of time and cathectic energy, and in the
meantime the existence of the lost object is psychically prolonged.

(244-5)

For Freud, Radcliffe, and Wordsworth, the projection of images of the deceased (what
we might call “seeing ghosts”) is a psychological response to loss.

Hence, for Wordsworth and Radcliffe, to be visited by a ghost can be desirable
and exhilarating; it can mean regaining communion with a lost companion.
Importantly, the appearance of Ann Tyson’s dead dog does not cause Wordsworth terror, but a “stormy joy,” just as the image of St. Aubert brings Emily “tender recollections” (Udolpho 592). These examples certainly contrast with the traditional gothic characterization of ghosts as terrorists of the living that must be exorcized from the real world. Perhaps the most commonly shared characteristic of the gothic novel is its inclusion of ghosts, phantoms, or specters. These might appear in a number of forms: a terrorizing giant (The Castle of Otranto), a wandering Jew (The Monk and Melmoth the Wanderer), or a bleeding nun (The Monk), but they are represented as threatening, unwelcome encroachers on the world of the living.8

This is not to say that Wordsworth’s poetry does not feature ghost-like, gothic characters constructed to elicit fear from his reader. Wordsworth populates his poetry with the dying and dead to a degree that forces us to acknowledge his clear fascination with such characters. We have already discussed Margaret, Martha, and the mad mother as belonging to this group. And, as we have already seen, many of Wordsworth’s other characters are also presented as the living dead, existing in a liminal space between life and death, haunting both his poetry and his readers. These liminal characters, like the beloved absent that haunt Emily, seem to be neither living nor dead, but perhaps both. The Oxford English Dictionary defines liminal as “of or pertaining to the threshold or initial stage of a process.” Here, I use liminal to describe

8 In The Monk Antonia, believing she has seen her mother’s ghost, cries, “Oh! I am the most unfortunate woman alive! My house is filled with ghosts and dead bodies” (276).
characters located at the threshold between life and death, whose statuses as one or the other are indeterminate or confused.

Yet before examining Wordsworth’s “parade” of liminal characters, we must first understand Wordsworth’s own unique understanding of mortality, particularly his own mortality. For, in many ways, Wordsworth imagined himself as liminal. Perhaps due to the early loss of his parents, Wordsworth spent the duration of his life proleptically aware of his own death and sought out means for communion with the dead. At the same time, he hoped that his verse might enable him to live beyond his death. Wordsworth’s own identity—as the convergence point of mortality and immortality—leads him to depict characters in his own liminal image.

Throughout his life Wordsworth was highly aware of his own mortality. At just seventeen, he writes in The Vale, “A still voice whispers to my breast: I soon shall be with them that rest” (31-2). Anticipating his own death, he goes on to imagine himself “In peace beneath the green grass heap” (44). Here, Wordsworth ponders his own death and burial with an unusual degree of serenity, but other jottings from this time refer to his own death in less accepting terms. He writes in 1788:

Death like a Rock his shade has cast
Black over the chill sad vale of my days
I view his lowering form aghast
Still as I tread the shadowy maze. (Landon 579)

Importantly, what Wordsworth laments in these lines is not death as a one-time event, but death as an ongoing entity that has imposed itself, and will continue to impose
itself, upon his life. Critics such as J. Hillis Miller have noted Wordsworth’s frequent reference to, and acute awareness of, his own pending death. Miller attributes this, as we have already noted, to the early loss of his parents, calling this tendency “the reaching toward death of a human mind that has accepted death or that has survived the death of another” (75). It seems likely that his parents’ deaths brought about his extraordinary awareness of his mortality, for he would later write, “Nothing was more difficult for me in childhood that to admit the notion of death as a state applicable to my own being” (Romanticism 582). Regardless of the cause, Wordsworth imagined himself as a dweller at death’s threshold, an occupant of the liminal space between life and death.

Even as death cast a “chill sad vale” over Wordsworth’s days, we have evidence that he hoped his verse would render him immortal, as Miller has also noted. Wordsworth was continually frustrated by the ephemerality of words on paper, as he writes:

Oh! why hath not the Mind
Some element to stamp her image on
In nature somewhat nearer to her own?
Why, gifted with such powers to send abroad
Her spirit, must it lodge in shrines so frail?

(1850 Prelude, V, 45-9)

For Wordsworth, books were a fail shrine, hardly durable enough for meaningful language. This belief resulted in his tendency to write his own verse on stones, walls,
and buildings, a practice Miller identifies as Wordsworth’s manner of “ stamping” himself onto the natural world. Miller notes that many of Wordsworth’s titles provide “extreme circumstantiality of detail with which they identify the act whereby the poem was given physical existence” (81). The full title of one of his earliest poems, “Lines left upon a Seat in Yew-Tree, which stands near the Lake of Esthwaite, on a desolate part of the Shore, commanding a beautiful prospect” emphasizes the importance of the particular physical place where Wordsworth originally wrote the verse with his slate pencil, as if to remind himself and his reader that a more permanent printing of the work exists elsewhere.

Because Wordsworth hoped his writings would render him immortal, he not only desired that his writings last in a physical sense, but also wanted to maintain ownership of them. Throughout his life he was actively involved in the politics of copyright reform, urging for an extension of the term of copyright. Eilenberg discusses this passion, noting, “Wordsworth’s interest in the matter verged upon the excessive. He seems to have invested the problem with a significance for which practical considerations cannot altogether account” (194).

His passion seems appropriate, however, when we take into account the evidence that Wordsworth regarded an author’s oeuvre as his sacred, self-produced memorial. In 1819, when Wordsworth was asked to contribute toward a monument for the deceased Robert Burns, he refused, noting that Burns “has raised for himself a monument so conspicuous, and of such imperishable materials, as to render a local fabric of stone superfluous, and, therefore, comparatively insignificant” (qtd. Eilenberg
For Wordsworth, the poet’s verse was his monument, and for this reason, as much as any other, he railed against government efforts to desecrate that monument. In this spirit, Wordsworth spent over three decades lobbying and arguing for the extension of copyright terms, only to make moderate progress that he viewed as unsatisfactory.

Wordsworth’s desire for literary immortality is evident not only in his dissatisfaction with the durability of books and his efforts to extend copyright terms, but also in his lifelong frustration with the task of writing *The Recluse*—the work he intended to be his masterpiece and legacy, a work he notoriously failed to complete. Miller calls Wordsworth’s failure one of “poetic impotence, an impotence born of the poet’s largeness of ambition and self-imposed inclusiveness of scope” (65). His anxiety about his inability to complete the work he intended to be his own “monument”—one “so conspicuous…as to render a local fabric of stone superfluous”—was so extreme as to cause him physical illness (*Wordsworth* 191). Wordsworth’s interest in leaving behind a literary legacy is symptomatic of his deep and troubling awareness that his life would one day end. And, because Wordsworth was so aware of his pending death, he strived, in various ways, to ensure his own immortality. In this sense, he reminds us of the forest he describes in Book VI of the 1805 *Prelude*, “woods decaying, never to be decayed” (625). He imagines himself as a dweller at death’s threshold, an occupant of the liminal space between life and death.

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9 Wordsworth also believed that an extension of copyright terms might improve his family’s finances, and would rightly favor writers who might gain popularity only after being initially neglected by his or her contemporaries. See Eileenberg 194-5.
His identity as a liminal figure is only made more complex by his belief in “pre-existence,” the idea that humans exist even before birth, in an alternate form. He writes in his “Intimations Ode”:

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting
The soul that rises with us, our life’s star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting
And cometh from afar. (58-61)

In 1843, Wordsworth would defend these lines saying, “when I was impelled to write this poem on the immortality of the soul, I took hold of the notion of pre-existence as having sufficient foundation in humanity for authorizing me to make for my purpose the best use of it I could as a poet” (Romanticism 582). Wordsworth believed in the “indomitableness of the spirit” and its existence both before life and after death.

Hence, Wordsworth’s notion of pre-existence, his anticipation of his own death, and hope that he would live, at least through his verse, beyond death, show that Wordsworth did not regard the categories of “living” and “dead” as definitively as one might assume. This is important since his self-identification as liminal accounts, I would argue, for his tendency to construct liminal characters that, here again, are not easily recognized as living or dead—ghostly characters that haunt the reader and infuse their respective texts with a gothicism their poet disavowed.

To find examples of such a liminal character, we need look no further than Lucy Gray. Wordsworth wrote what have come to be known as the “Lucy poems” while in Goslar, Germany between October 1798 and February 1799. The group of poems is
conventionally considered to include “Strange Fits of Passion,” “She Dwelt Among the Untrodden Ways,” “A Slumber did my Spirit Steal,” and “Three Years She Grew,” on the grounds that they all appeared in the 1800 *Lyrical Ballads*. However, the reader of these four poems might be best informed by “Lucy Gray,” which tells the story of young Lucy’s disappearance from her parents during a trip to town before a storm, and where the reader’s understanding of her as living or dead fluctuates stanza by stanza. Even prior to mentioning the storm, Wordsworth explains that “the sweet face of Lucy Gray / Will never more be seen.” When the untimely storm hits we are told that Lucy “never reached the town,” at which point her parents go looking for her, finding only her footprints:

They followed from the snowy bank
Those footmarks, one by one,
Into the middle of the plank;
And further there were none!
Yet some maintain that to this day
She is a living child;
That you may see sweet Lucy Gray
Upon the lonesome wild. (53-60)

Like Lucy’s parents and their community, the reader is left to wonder if Lucy is dead or alive. Susan Eilenberg has written of Wordsworth’s refusal to provide information about Lucy’s status that “the poet of the Lucy poems goes further than the poet of, say, ‘Simon Lee’; for where in ‘Simon Lee’ there is nothing to tell, in the Lucy poems there
is: the poet simply does not tell it… a tombstone would be more informative” (110). Because Lucy occupies both categories, living and dead, she seems to be an extension of Wordsworth’s identity as liminal.

Eilenberg reads “Lucy Gray” as a poetic demonstration of the axioms and program Wordsworth avowed in the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, “employing the smallest possible stimulus to move his readers’ imaginations and sympathies.” However, while Wordsworth omits the details about Lucy’s disappearance, her liminal status and its surrounding mystery does little to diminish the reading public’s “degrading thirst after outrageous stimulation” (500). Rather, the reader is invited to supply his own interpretation of the facts, with the result that “the Lucy poems fall, ironically enough, into a Gothicism even ghostlier than the one Wordsworth meant to avoid” (Eilenberg 111). Because Wordsworth does not use graphic description of violence or gore, his gothicism is of the Radcliffean sort—represented, but not detailed. In this way, the gothicism of the Lucy poems contrasts with that of the traditional gothic novel, which unapologetically ambushes readers with one shocking and graphic description after the next.10

Among Wordsworth’s liminal characters, we also find the discharged soldier.

Let us remind ourselves of this gothic figure’s physical description:

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10We might compare Lucy’s presumed death with Lewis’s graphic description of the cruel vengeance of a mob on St. Ursula in *The Monk*: “the rioters still exercised their impotent rage upon her lifeless body. They beat it, trod upon it, and ill-used it, till it became no more that a mass of flesh, unsightly, shapeless, and disgusting” (302). Lewis’s jarring description is hardly Wordsworth’s “gentle shock of mild surprise.”
It chanced a sudden turning of the road  
Presented to my view an uncouth shape  

...  
He was of stature tall,  
A foot above a man’s common measure tall,  
Stiff in form, and upright, lank and lean –  
...  
His arms were long, and bare his hands; his mouth  
Shewed ghastly in the moonlight  
...  
Long time  
Did I pursue him with a mingled sense  
Of fear and sorrow. From his lips meanwhile  
There issued murmuring sounds, as if of pain  
Of uneasy thought  
...  
I wished to see him move, but he remained  
Fixed to his place, and still from time to time  
Sent forth a murmuring voice of dead complaint,  
Groans scarcely audible. (401-33)  

Jonathan Wordsworth writes of this description: “One is almost surprised that the  
Soldier possesses a shadow…the Soldier’s unnatural height, meager stiffness, ghastly
mouth—have taken on an obsessional quality…His legs seem not related to the body they sustain, his bones may actually be wounding him…the Discharged Soldier is reduced to frightening inhumanity” (Borders 13). There is no doubt that Wordsworth intended this character to be ghost-like or supernatural in an unworldly sense. His description closely resembles the description of Wordsworth’s specter guide in *The Vale*:

> Faint was the trace
> Of mortal feature on his face;
> Black were his bones seen through his skin
> …
> But from his trembling shadow broke
> Faint murmuring, sad and hollow moans
> As if the wind sighed through his bones. (II, 91-101)

Similarly, in “Resolution and Independence,” Wordsworth describes his leech-gatherer as “Like a Sea-beast” that is “not all alive nor dead” (69-71). Paulson finds the leech-gatherer particularly eerie, calling the character “in the technical sense of the term a grotesque, embodying a transitional state between human and natural or inanimate forms” (261). Lucy Gray, the discharged soldier, and the leech-gatherer are frightening in that they are neither alive nor dead, but both. These characters, as intermediaries between states, are reflective not only of Wordsworth’s self-identity as liminal, but also of his strong desire, as a mourner, to bridge the worlds of the living and the dead.
Perhaps in response to his anxiety about death’s inherent divisiveness, Wordsworth’s writing, both his poetry and prose, emphasizes the bond between the living and the dead. In the 1805 Prelude he writes that there ought to be “One great Society alone on earth: / The noble living and the noble dead” (X, 968-9) and in Essays on Epitaphs (1810) he argues for communion between the living and the dead. Kurt Fosso’s recent study on mourning and community in Wordsworth’s writings highlights the extent to which the dead participate in Wordsworth’s conception of social structure, explaining, “in Wordsworth it is not community that leads to a connection to the dead so much as it is the dead, and more specifically the relationship of the living to them, that leads to community” (7).

This idea of integrating the dead into the community of the living is best exemplified by Wordsworth’s “We Are Seven,” in which an adult narrator deliberates with a cottage child about the status of her dead siblings. Though little Jane and John are dead, the cottage girl refuses to classify them as such. And why should she? She still knits with them, sings to them, and eats supper with them—they are integral parts of her own life because she imagines it so. The narrator urges her to reclassify the deceased saying, “But they are dead—those two are dead!” to which she asserts, “we are seven” (Romanticism 374-5). We might say that Wordsworth and this young cottage girl share a similar conception of death. Wu writes, the “young Wordsworth needed no intellectual ratification for the evidence of the senses: that no barrier could divide the living from the dead…who were united with him by an act of imaginative intensity,” or, as he put it in a notebook jotting ‘The dead friend is present in his
shade’’ (Earliest Poems, x). The underlying notion, that the dead can be imaginatively integrated into the world of the living, both reflects and revises the gothic convention of the dead’s intrusion into the world of the living.

Wordsworth’s anxiousness to maintain a kind of communicativeness with the deceased is laid out in his poem “The Boy of Winander,” which he included in the 1800 Lyrical Ballads and later in the 1805 and 1850 editions of The Prelude. This poem is about the despair of incommunication between the dead and living. Like Wordsworth, the boy of Winander is close with nature, and he spends his evenings conversing with owls. He

Blew mimic hooting to the silent owls
That they might answer him. And they would shout
Across the watery vale, and shout again
Responsive to his call, with quivering peals
And long halloos, and screams, and echoes loud
Redoubled and redoubled. (10-15)

The boy’s successful transmissions across the watery vale satisfy him deeply and create a “wild scene of mirth.” He imitates them, and they imitate him in turn. Sometimes, however, this is not the case. Sometimes the owls are unresponsive to his calls, and these “pauses of deep silence” mock the boy as he hangs in suspense.

Death intrudes upon the poem, seemingly out of nowhere, in the last line. The boy has died, and is once again denied communication with the others. The poem’s speaker visits the boy’s grave, but is silent:
The churchyard hangs
Upon a slope above the village school
And there, along the bank, when I have passed
At evening, I believe that oftentimes
A full half-hour together I have stood
Mute – for he died when he was ten years old. (27-32)

This is a poem about an untimely death, but perhaps more importantly about sudden, mysterious inaccessibility. By dying, the boy of Winander has been massively blocked off from something he once normally had access to, the world of the living, just as he was blocked off from the owl’s response. But Wordsworth shows us that there is something going on inside this isolation from the living world—a desire to be echoed, a need for acknowledgement, a distaste for muteness. Similarly, Wordsworth describes the human desire “to be remembered by our friends or kindred after death” in *Upon Epitaphs*. He explains that one thing separating man from the animals is his “desire to live in the remembrance of his fellows” (80-1). This poem demonstrates Wordsworth’s anxiety about the separation of the living and the dead, an anxiety that I argue is at least partially responsible for his fascination with ghost-like characters seemingly capable of breeching these realms.
CONCLUSION

After his youth, Wordsworth spent considerable energy distancing himself from the gothic, a literary force at the height of popularity during his lifetime. Yet his oeuvre is replete with many hallmarks of the gothic novels of his day. Taking Wordsworth at his philosophical word, critics have tended to ignore this fact, and those who do often trace this “double perspective” solely to a desire for commercial success. On the contrary, I regard Wordsworth’s declarations against the gothic as sincere, but argue that he was, nevertheless, psychologically drawn to this mode as the natural result of his personal experience of death and bereavement coupled with his lifelong interest in the powers of the imagination. Because Wordsworth was shaped by death and loss, his poetry could not contain his concerns without reflecting the psychological presence of his deceased father, the imaginative conjuring of lost loved ones, and characters that, like himself, seemed to simultaneously occupy this world and the next.

See Gamer 93 where he discusses *Lyrical Ballads* as a venture founded with the intent to “exploit the popularity of supernatural poetry for financial gain.”


