Forum

Members of the association are invited to submit letters, typed and doubled-spaced, commenting on articles published in *PMLA* or on matters of general scholarly or critical interest. Footnotes are discouraged, and letters of more than one thousand words will not be considered. Decision to publish and the right to edit are reserved to the editor, and the authors of articles discussed will be invited to respond.

"The Drowned Man of Esthwaite"

To the Editor:

While Susan J. Wolfson's engaging essay "The Illusion of Mastery: Wordsworth's Revisions of 'The Drowned Man of Esthwaite,' 1799, 1805, 1850" (99 [1984]: 917–35) may be part of a larger "study on autobiography and the English Romantics," it overlooks one of the central autobiographical implications of Wordsworth's revisions of this passage of *The Prelude*. I refer to the question of narrative point of view in the drowned man "spot of time." In none of the quoted versions of the poem is the young boy described as having actually witnessed the corpse rising "bolt upright / . . . with his ghastly face." The appearance of the dead man—the incident that turns this narrative from a mere confusion into a "spot of time"—is, perhaps, a purely imaginative construction, a product of Wordsworth's "inner eye." The drowned man "spot" does not seem to record an experience that is comparable to similar sights "among the shining streams / Of fairyland, the forests of romance—" (1805). Rather, the corpse also appears to be an entirely literary construction, a product of Wordsworth's hypersensitive, analogic imagination. The three texts reproduced with Wolfson's essay help to confirm this suspicion.

In "The Two-Part *Prelude* of 1799," the boy's careful nighttime watching of the still lake gives way abruptly to a description of the search party:

> 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. (274–79)

Are we, as readers, meant to assume that the seven-year-old narrator is riding in the search boat? If so, why doesn't he describe himself as part of "their" company? Are we meant to imagine that he is standing on the shore? From this vantage point it would be impossible to see the corpse rising "bolt upright." In the lines that follow, Wordsworth hints at his distance, as a poet, from the actual scene: "I might advert / To numberous accidents . . . / Of rural history, that impressed my mind / With images." The mind of the sensitive boy produces "images" when he learns of incidents like the drowning of the schoolmaster. Such imaginative constructions then "exist with independent life" and "know no decay." The first-person narrator of this "spot of time" says that he has seen a pile of clothes by a still lake. Has he seen anything else?

The 1805 text confirms the suggestion that, unlike the rest of this passage, the rising corpse occurs nowhere but in the poet's mind. Wordsworth's revisions illuminate the autobiographical origins of this powerful mental image. In 1805 we learn that the "company" went in search of the drowned man because of the pile of clothes—"Those unclaimed garments telling a plain tale." In addition, the dead man with his ghastly face becomes a subject of interpretation for the first time. He is "a spectre shape—/ Of terror even." The possibility of terror is immediately mitigated by the comparison between this horrific image and the aesthetic "dignity" and "smoothness" of similar details from fairy tales and romances. The child's guilt—has he reported seeing the garments?—is resolved by suggesting that the garments tell a "tale." The troubled boy is not implicated in the drowning if a whole "company" arrives the next day because of a message "reported" by a pile of clothes. The lines emphasize again that the boy is not part of this "company." But if he is not part of "their" company, if he is not in "their boat," how has he seen the "spectre" shape? Fear may have gripped him only later, when he learned that the clothes he had seen the night before belonged to the drowned schoolmaster. In 1799, he has heard of numerous "accidents in flood and field," all of which produced permanent images in his mind. But he does not need to have witnessed the rising corpse, any more than he needs to have witnessed any of these accidents. Wordsworth's autobiographical involvement may well end with the unrevised "breathless stillness" on the night before the discovery of the body.

By 1850, Wordsworth's revisions at once cloud and illuminate this aspect of the poetic process. In the final version, the connection between the clothes and the searchers is made explicit, and the searchers are joined by a crowd:

> Those unclaimed garments telling a plain tale
> Drew to the spot an anxious crowd; some looked
> In passive expectation from the shore,
> While from a boat others hung o'er the deep.
> (443–46)

Where is the first-person narrator? Why does a group of onlookers suddenly appear on the shore of Esthwaite? Are we meant to assume that the boy is in their company? If Wordsworth distinguishes the hanging boaters from the passive onlookers, why does he fail to give the first-person narrator a viewpoint? The clue is found in a small but significant 1850 revision of the corpse description. In 1799 and 1805 the corpse "Rose with his ghastly face." In 1850, the corpse "Rose, with his ghastly face." The addition of the comma modifies the emphasis of the image. In the earlier version the corpse shows his face *as* he rises. In 1850, the corpse rises and *also* has a ghastly face. The young Wordsworth may have actually seen the boaters pull the body from the lake and then seen the face when the boat reached the shore. He may not have been present when the body was recovered. The autobiographical facts do not alter the power of the poem. What is significant is our recognition that the image that allows this "spot of time" to take on a "fructifying virtue"—the bolt upright corpse with ghastly face—emerges out of experience but does not simply record experience. Instead, it records the poet's mind in the act of finding, or producing, a symbol to stand for the power that once invested a particular state of mind.

The uncertainties revealed in these revisions hint at one reason why Wordsworth kept the "poem to Coleridge" unpublished. Early and late he was plagued by uncertainties about what he could justifiably claim on the basis of his own experience. Beyond his perceptual experience of the world lay sights of the "inner eye," those images that corresponded to nothing in the physical world and yet served as revelation in all the "spots of time." Wordsworth worried from 1799 to 1850 that perhaps these images were the only source of his poetic power.

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Reply:

I thank Ashton Nichols for his energetic response to my essay, but I confess to difficulty in following some of his logic. Nichols has asserted that in "none of the quoted versions of the poem is the young boy described as having actually witnessed the corpse rising 'bolt upright,'" and he argues that my inattention "to the question of narrative point of view" in this episode results in my not having grasped "one of the central autobiographical implications of Wordsworth's revisions of this passage"—namely that the corpse "appears to be an entirely literary construction, a product of Wordsworth's hypersensitive, analogic imagination." It is true that in the text of 1799, Wordsworth elides the notation of an "I" on the scene "The succeeding day" and that this elision is intriguing, perhaps, when compared to the notation "I watched" that he does write into the recollection of the previous twilight (not "nighttime") vigil at the lake. My assumption that the boy was at the lake the succeeding day derives from my reading of the two succeeding texts: in the text of 1805, Wordsworth explicitly refers to "what I saw" (479); the same statement of presence is implied in the 1850 text in the phrase "Such sights" (sights such as that of the corpse) and by Wordsworth's reference to this sight as "the sad spectacle." I suppose that these sights could be "imaginative" fabrications, but the ocular notations dilute their quality as "purely" that. Wordsworth's writing conveys the impression of an eyewitness account.

As to "the question of narrative point of view," I am happy to agree with Nichols that the point of view is not that of someone who was on "their boat"; we both congratulate the search party for their wisdom in not taking a seven- or eight-year-old boy along for the ride. The "*narrative* point of view" is, of course, retrospective, but if Nichols means to argue about an *experiential* point of view, I do not agree that "it would be impossible to see the corpse rising 'bolt upright'" from a vantage point on the shore. Maps show the lake to be rather narrow at Hawkshead. Moreover, Wordsworth himself tells us, the boy has vision sufficiently sharp to see "through the gloom" of twilight and "distinctly" discern "A heap of garments" "on the opposite shore"; what is so difficult about believing that in daylight he could discern the shape of a corpse rising from the lake itself at a somewhat closer distance? discern even its face?

Other aspects of Nichols's critique leave me still more perplexed. It does not follow, for instance, that because the autobiographer of 1799 says "I might advert / To numerous accidents . . . that impressed my mind / With images," he implies his boyhood "distance from the actual scene": not only is such a deduction without logic, but it ignores the possibility that the verse does suggest—namely that the autobiographer may not have indulged his proposed advertence precisely because this episode resists assimilation to those other reported "accidents" of "rural history" that take up residence in the mind as "images to which in following years / Far other feelings were attached." This event seems to have had a different afterlife, in which both the boy and the autobiographer he was to become remain haunted by the immediate impression of the corpse and its ghastly face. Nor do I agree that it is in the 1850 text that "the dead man with his ghastly face becomes a subject of interpretation for the first time": a careful reading of the 1799 text shows it to be full of interpretive efforts. Nor do I agree with Nichols that in the 1805 text "The possibility of terror is immediately mitigated by the comparison between this horrific image and the aesthetic 'dignity' and 'smoothness' of similar details from fairy tales and romances." Wordsworth of course writes that this was the case, but I am not alone in thinking that