Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Sir George Beaumont: Collaboration and the 'Sketcheresque'

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IN 1815 WORDSWORTH DEDICATED THE FIRST COLLECTED EDITION of his *Poems* to Sir George Beaumont, '[w]ishing and hoping that this Work, with the embellishments it has received from your pencil, may survive as a lasting memorial of a friendship, which I reckon among the blessings of my life'.[1] In offering this combination of his poetic 'Work' and Beaumont's artistic 'embellishments' as a memorial of such a valuable friendship, Wordsworth elevates the significance of the frontispieces Beaumont contributed to the volumes. Engravings of Beaumont's painting for 'Lucy Gray' and 'Peele Castle in a Storm' appeared as frontispieces to the 1815 edition, and Beaumont also provided frontispieces for *The White Doe of Rylstone* (1815), *Peter Bell* (1819), and all four of the volumes Wordsworth published in 1820.[2] These images, and the letters in which Beaumont and Wordsworth discuss them, suggest that painter and poet engaged in a mode of collaboration that is unexpected in the context of patronage; they also highlight the importance, for Wordsworth, of the reader's role in completing the 'Work'.

Coleridge's 'Translations'

The nature of this collaboration comes into focus through Coleridge's earlier attempt to join his poetry to Beaumont's pictures. At their first meeting, Sir George took a dislike to Coleridge, forming 'a Great objection to his political opinions'.[3] But when Beaumont next met Coleridge (alongside Wordsworth) in Keswick in the summer of 1803 Sir George re-evaluated his initial impression, Coleridge repented his prejudice against 'all persons of [Beaumont's] rank in Society' (CL II 1003), and the two men expressed mutual admiration. In the context of this unsteady start to their friendship, Coleridge planned a volume of poems based on a series of drawings by Sir George. He began by recording in his notebooks what he called 'translations' of thirty-one images and, in a letter of 1 October 1803, explained the relationship he envisaged between the pictures and the prospective poems: 'Of the poems on your Sketches, dear Sir George! I hope thus much/that they will give evidence that the Drawings acted upon my mind as Nature does, in it's after workings — they have mingled with my Thoughts, & furnished Forms to my Feelings' (CL II 1004). Four months later, Coleridge reported that '[t]he more I have thought of the Translations from the Drawings, the more & more deeply am I persuaded of the excellence of the Idea'; he declared that of thirteen 'I have already the *leading Idea* — that is to say — whether I mean it as a moral Descriptive-poem, whether an

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1 *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. by W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser, 3 vols. (OUP, 1974), III, 17-18.

2 Mark Reed, *A Bibliography of William Wordsworth, 1787-1930*, 2 vols. (CUP, 2013), I, 39, 43, 52, 60-2.

3 Tom Mayberry, 'A Newly-Discovered Letter of Sir George Beaumont, 1803', *The Coleridge Bulletin*, 1, p. 6.

Inscription, whether a Tale' (CL II 1055). The 'translations' demonstrate how closely Coleridge looked at the images. Like sustained observation of nature, concentrated attention to the drawings produced 'after workings' in Coleridge's mind which would eventually generate poetic 'Forms'.

As aids to poetic composition, the 'translations' are intriguing. For example, the ninth begins thus:

> 9th Two Inches square (of ten Inches' breadth, 5½ in length) A (or Right-hand side) the Bank of a Hill stream, a Man half-lying, half sitting, with his back to the Stream, close before him (so as that the Toes of their Shoes must meet) a man standing, & a dog with his Tail cocked up (whose Tail prolonged in the same direction exactly ¼th of an Inch would touch the Breech of the upright man, the dogs' head smelling at the ground. — The next five Inches square contains, I. the waterslope from the overshot wheel, one inch/then a smooth water, and then another steeper & shorter slope; — and the remaining three Inches the 3rd Turn of the again smooth water, having for its bank a rough Hillock 3½ Inches high, and increasing in width from 1½ to 4½. (CN II 1899)

What is the value of these measurements and minute details, and how was Coleridge planning to convert them into poetry? Coleridge's description of the closeness of the toes of the men's shoes, for example, and his attention to variations in texture (such as the transition between the 'waterslope' and the 'smooth water and then another steeper & shorter slope' within five square inches, and the combination of 'smooth water' and 'rough Hillock' within 'the remaining three Inches') capture the precision of Beaumont's composition. From the artist's perspective, such precision was important: Sir Joshua Reynolds established exactitude as one of the most laudable principles of painting and, following Reynolds, Beaumont admired the work of Claude Lorrain who 'perhaps is the only painter' who has accurately determined 'every flower, blade of grass, & almost the fibres of the leaves' without being mechanical.[4] Reynolds's *Discourses* dictate that — unlike poets — painters are 'obliged to give a determined form':

> This notion therefore, of leaving any thing to the imagination, opposes a very fixed and indispensable rule in our art, — that every thing shall be carefully and distinctly expressed, as if the painter knew, with correctness and precision, the exact form and character of whatever is introduced into the picture.[5]

In this sense, painting is opposed to poetry which 'operates by raising our curiosity, engaging the mind by degrees […] and surprising at last' (*Discourses*,

[4] Beaumont to William Gilpin, 27 June 1802, MS. Eng. Misc. c. 389, fol. 42-3, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford. Beaumont seems to have offended Gilpin by suggesting that Gilpin's work is imprecise.

[5] *The Works of Sir Joshua Reynolds*, ed. by Edmond Malone, 3 vols. (London, 1801), I, 285.

I, 247). Accordingly, Coleridge's 'translations' (which are preliminary to poetry) generally resist such appeals to the imagination. For example:

> 2. Uneven Ground, below which in the Front of the Picture, A. a streamlet & low one-arched Bridge. — Above it & losing itself in the A ~~edge~~ perpendicular Line of the Picture-frame the foot of a Hill with Tufts of Trees. […] in the Center *A* <solitary> *Church* on a Hillock, unenclosed, unrailed, wild —!! behind it you see *down ~~into~~ upon* a flat vale/: the whole back of the Picture filled by Mountains in the Two Ridges — clouds upon them[.]

Coleridge methodically surveys Beaumont's drawing from foreground to background without allowing his depiction of the 'unenclosed, unrailed, wild' hillock to develop figuratively.

In recording measurements, proportion and perspective, Coleridge was perhaps planning to produce moral-descriptive poetry, the standard eighteenth-century model for which was James Thomson's *The Seasons* (1730). Thomson learned to observe nature from Claude; he applied Claude's compositional formulae to natural scenes and crafted carefully controlled blank verse syntax which, in turn, taught readers (including Wordsworth and Coleridge) how to look at a landscape.[6] John Barrell explains that 'the direct connection between Claude's way of looking at landscape and Thomson's was fairly generally assumed in the eighteenth century, and precisely because no other way of looking except Claude's could easily be imagined'.[7] Coleridge's 'translations' may be interpreted as an attempt to nurture with Beaumont a connection similar to that between Thomson and Claude, whereby the descriptive poet looks with an artist's eye and follows patterns established in pictures.

In response to those of Beaumont's drawings that focus on a single image (such as the seventh which contains a boat in a rocky chamber or the thirteenth which depicts a man sitting on a tomb stone), Coleridge had no need to record measurements or layers of perspective. Such 'translations' would perhaps have developed into topographical inscriptions. In other instances, Coleridge's passages are a little more susceptible to conjecture regarding how the poems might have developed:

> 23. A Mad Yew-tree alone, […] a woodland tho' wide road between it, & the Skirt of a wood — an old Hag with a collection of sticks under her arm, a boy lying on the Ground, but looking up to her/the Yew Tree is old, its very Trunk split & shattered with age & lightening — its upright limbs finely intertwisted—

[6] Coleridge records measurements of the landscape during his Scafell tour of August 1802. See, for example, CL II 845. James Heffernan explores the influence of Thomson in 'Wordsworth and Landscape', in *The Oxford Handbook of William Wordsworth*, ed. by Richard Gravil and Daniel Robinson (OUP, 2015), pp. 614-28 (p. 615).

[7] *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place* (CUP, 1972), p. 13.

The woman's mental and physical state may be seen to be reflected in the characterisation of the 'Mad' tree. As Coleridge describes the 'intertwisted' limb cleaving from the aged trunk, he hints at a comparison with the haggard woman and the sticks 'under her arm', implicitly mapping her decrepitude on to the tree. Her assumed social exclusion matches the singularity of the yew that stands 'alone'.[8] With such implications, this 'translation' might have developed into a narrative tale.

Sir George Howland Beaumont, Y*ew Tree at Foxley, Hereforshire*, 20 October 1802. Chalk and watercolour on paper. The Whitworth, University of Manchester

Yet the poems never materialised. In producing these 'translations', Coleridge worked in deference to a new patron whom he had not long since offended; Beaumont's images took precedence and Coleridge approached them on an artist's terms. The passages preserve mimetic precision which, as Reynolds maintains, is the domain of the painter.

Wordsworth's 'Sketch'

In May 1807, scathing reviews of *Poems, in Two Volumes* prompted Lady Beaumont to declare her admiration and allegiance to Wordsworth. He replied

[8] The drawing in question (not identified in Coburn's notes) is Beaumont's 'Yew Tree at Foxley, Herefordshire', dated 20 October 1802. Foxley was the home of the picturesque theorist Sir Uvedale Price, whose *Essay on the Picturesque* (1794) did much to encourage greater appreciation of rugged trees and ruins. The drawing is currently in the collection at the Whitworth Art Gallery, University of Manchester.

that the taste of the reading public would have to be refashioned before his poetry could be appreciated widely:

> never forget what I believe was observed to you by Coleridge, that every great and original writer, in proportion as he is great or original, must himself create the taste by which he is to be relished; he must teach the art by which he is to be seen; this, in a certain degree, even to all persons, however wise and pure may be their lives, and however unvitiated their taste; but for those who dip into books in order to give an opinion of them, or talk about them to take up an opinion — for this multitude of unhappy, and misguided, and misguiding beings, an entire regeneration must be produced; and if this be possible, it must be a work *of time*.[9]

Wordsworth aspired to overhaul public taste and to fashion judicious readers. He was convinced that such 'regeneration' would be morally and socially beneficial and that Lady Beaumont would 'share with [him] an invincible confidence that [his] writings […] will, in their degree, be efficacious in making men wiser, better, and happier' (p. 150). Although the taste he wished to create was original, the sentiment of Wordsworth's endeavour was not. Joshua Reynolds had argued that 'Reformation is a work of time. A national taste, however wrong it may be, cannot be totally changed at once' (I 238). Moreover, Reynolds taught that artists must strive to 'raise the thoughts' of their spectators until that which 'began by Taste, may, as it is exalted and refined, conclude in Virtue' (II 8).[10] As committed disciples of Reynolds and professed admirers of Wordsworth's genius, the Beaumonts could not but be sympathetic towards this scheme.

Wordsworth's *The White Doe of Rylstone; or The Fate of the Nortons* (composed in 1807 but withheld from the press until 1815) was a concerted effort to regenerate the public taste for romance. The poem challenged contemporary readers by subverting the generic expectations it establishes. The medieval setting, the apparatus of minstrelsy, and the appropriation of a tale based on local legend encourage the reader to expect an exciting story in the style of Walter Scott; but as the poem defiantly withholds such thrilling action, readers were (understandably) confused. Peter J. Manning helpfully describes this generic defiance as Wordsworth's attempt to shift a narrative form as far as possible towards lyric.[11] The contrast between popular romances and *The White Doe* highlights Wordsworth's elevation of interiority and contemplation above exterior action and incident: 'there [is] nothing in [the poem] to excite curiosity' and 'the main catastrophe [is] not a material but an intellectual one' (*MY i.*, p. 222). The poem repudiates visible events and icons (such as

[9] *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: the Middle Years, pt. i.*, ed. by Mary Moorman (Oxford: Clarendon, 1969), p. 150. Hereafter *MY i.*

[10] Beaumont agrees with Reynolds that the 'reputations of both poets & painters invariably find their level in a century, or a century & half': letter to Gilpin, 4 September 1802, fol. 46. Beaumont sent Wordsworth a copy of Malone's edition of Reynolds's *Works* (1801) in 1804.

[11] '*The White Doe of Rylstone* and Later Narrative Poems', in *Oxford Handbook of WW*, pp. 268-88 (pp. 270-6).

Norton's banner) — which might be captured by a painter — in favour of Emily's fortitude and faith which cannot be seen.

In this sense it is pertinent that Wordsworth should have referred to *The White Doe* as a 'picture'. Alarmed at Charles Lamb's lack of appreciation for the poem, Wordsworth exclaimed:

> Let Lamb learn to be ashamed of himself in not taking some pleasure in the contemplation of this picture, which supposing it to be even but a sketch, is yet sufficiently made out for any man of true power to finish it for himself. (*MY i.*, 222)

Talking about poetry in terms of pictures, and particularly in terms of sketching, was not unusual throughout the eighteenth century. Simon Jarvis explains that because 'painting is widely understood in this period to be a more fully mimetic medium than literature, painterly idioms offer a natural way of talking about what writing cannot exhaustively state and what the reader must bring'.[12] The participation of the reader is vitalising. For example, Joseph Addison notes that well-chosen words '[give] us more lively Ideas than the Sight of Things themselves' and allow the reader to envisage 'a Scene drawn in stronger Colours, and painted more to the Life in his Imagination'.[13] For Edmund Burke 'the most lively and spirited verbal description […] raises a very obscure and imperfect *idea*'; such indistinctness (which Burke associates with the sublime) gives poetry superiority over the clarity of painting: 'it is in my power to raise a stronger *emotion* by the description than I could do by the best painting'.[14] Burke notes, however, that 'unfinished sketches of drawing' approach the power of verbal description by offering the imagination 'the promise of something more' (p. 63). A sketch, more than a precisely finished painting, resembles poetry in its appeal to the imagination.[15]

Wordsworth's disappointment in Charles Lamb raises questions about the terms on which *The White Doe* constitutes a literary 'sketch' and the sense in which it requires completion. Sketches differ from literary fragments, which do not beg to be completed but celebrate their open-endedness, while Hannah More's association of a sketch with the 'epistolary style' emphasizes immediacy and roughness.[16] Yet *The White Doe* is quiet and measured, not a spontaneous or fragmentary effusion. When she contrasts 'sketching […] for amusement' with 'finishing for the public', More suggests a distinction between disinterested levity and polished vanity; yet Wordsworth's chastising tone and assertion that Lamb should be 'ashamed' reveals the moral integrity Wordsworth associated with the ability to 'finish' his sketch.

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[12] 'Criticism, Taste, Aesthetics', in *The Cambridge Companion to English Literature, 1740-1839* (CUP, 2004), p. 37.

[13] *The Spectator*, No. 416, 27 June 1712, ed. by Donald F. Bond (Oxford: Clarendon, 1965; revised 1987), III, p. 560.

[14] *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. by Paul Guyer (OUP, 2015), p. 49.

[15] William Hazlitt highlights some inconsistencies in Reynolds's thinking about neatness and high finishing in *Table Talk; or, Original Essays* (London, 1821), pp. 322-3.

[16] *The Letters of Hannah More*, ed. by R. Brimley Johnson (London: John Lane, 1925), p. 114.

The manner in which *The White Doe* requires finishing is implicit in a challenge Wordsworth issued to Beaumont when he suggested that Sir George would be able to deduce the 'one situation' which 'would furnish as fine a subject for a Picture as anything I remember in Poetry antient or modern'. Wordsworth believed that he 'need not mention what it is; as when you [Sir George] read the Poem you cannot miss it' (*MY i.*, p. 196). Given that the poem diminishes the significance of visible objects and activity, Wordsworth was here implicitly testing (and casting a vote of confidence in) Beaumont's aptitude as a reader. Indeed Beaumont did not miss the lines Wordsworth had in mind: he succeeded in finishing Wordsworth's metaphorical 'sketch' by producing his own.

In November 1814, however, Beaumont confessed: 'I have done what I can for the White Doe but you must recollect that I am not able to express all I feel in the figures'.[17] Beaumont was not an incompetent artist, yet he apologetically admitted that his painting did not capture all he felt in response to the poem. He attempted to surmount this problem:

> If I have time I may perhaps be able to sketch some other subjects for the Poems — but I cannot promise myself that pleasure, for I am a poor hand at any thing which does not rise spontaneously — but I shall stand a better chance if I do not confine myself to subjects actual *in* the Poems — but to such as are rural & in harmony with them. (WLL/47)

Beaumont's sketches 'rise spontaneously' but only as a result of reflection that takes place once the books have been closed; in other words, the images are non-mimetic responses, not direct illustrations.[18] Illustrations exist for clarification and elucidation, whereas Beaumont's images for Wordsworth's poems are additive and invite their own interpretation. The painting for *Peter Bell* exemplifies this point. Beaumont suggests that it should be a 'tailpiece' rather than a frontispiece 'because you know my subject does not relate to any thing *in* the poem but to the state of the Hero afterwards' (WLL/46). The implication is that Beaumont 'finished' Wordsworth's poem by reflecting carefully on Peter's transformation. As a 'tailpiece' it serves as a model for how other readers might similarly contemplate and complete what they have read. Like the poem, it invites the considered participation of the reader.[19] Beaumont's paintings are worthy 'embellishments' of Wordsworth's 'Work'

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[17] WLL/Beaumont, George/49, Jerwood Centre, Grasmere. Hereafter WLL. All quotation of Beaumont's letters to Wordsworth appears by permission of The Wordsworth Trust.

[18] Peter Manning explores Wordsworth's nuanced objections to illustration in 'Wordsworth's "Illustrated Books and Newspapers" and 'Media in the City', in *Romanticism and the City*, ed. by Larry H. Peer (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 223-40. Manning's conclusions about Wordsworth's elevation of 'sustained inwardness' over 'evidence visible' and the responsiveness of the reader/viewer support my interpretation of Beaumont's 'embellishments'.

[19] Beaumont's painting for *Peter Bell* appeared on the cover of the Summer 2016 issue of *The Coleridge Bulletin* (47). Beaumont's admission that the image is not illustrative of any scene from the poem explains the inclusion of Peter's dog: it seems that Sir George did not 'ignore or forget' Wordsworth's statement that Peter travelled without his dog on the night described in the poem. See the editorial commentary on the cover image.

because they amplify the poet's belief that reading itself is a mode of collaboration.

Beaumont's 'Sketcheresque'

Between 1815 and 1820, in the context of over a decade of close friendship, Beaumont's 'embellishments' were printed alongside Wordsworth's poetry. Following a trip to Switzerland in 1820, Beaumont articulated his new painting style:

> you must know I had formed a sort of concetto, namely that Switzerland was more sketcheresque than picturesque & there *is* something in the notion, for the materials however sublime in reality, are certainly very heterogeneous —[…] in a slight sketch, if the mind by intelligent touches not too decisive, is led on truly to a certain point, the imagination will finish the picture to its own satisfaction but when white now blue sky, & black firs are too rigidly condensed, in all the grossness & materialism of oil, I never yet saw the result satisfactory. (WLL/67)

In rejecting the 'grossness & materialism of oil', Beaumont invites the spectator imaginatively to finish the picture. With the term 'sketcheresque', Beaumont tapped into the eighteenth-century discourse that aligns sketching more with the elusive power of poetry than with the exact mimesis of painting. As he collaborated with Wordsworth, Sir George developed a mode of 'sketcheresque' painting that rejected the precision he had previously sought to attain. Beaumont was 'rash enough to conceive' that by pursuing his 'concetto' he 'might possibly overturn [his] own system' (WLL/67). In effect, however, the system he overturned was that of Reynolds.

Coleridge's attempt to work with Beaumont operated within the conventional hierarchy of patronage: Coleridge approached Beaumont's drawings with an artist's eye. Wordsworth, on the other hand, made a disciple and a collaborator of his patron. In a letter of December 1817, Sir George echoed the words of Wordsworth's 1815 dedication when he stated that Wordsworth's friendship was 'amongst the prime blessings of [his] life'; 'to you', Beaumont wrote, 'I am principally beholden for having my eyes [turned] inwardly to my mind' (WLL/62).[20] As their friendship developed, Beaumont strove to be an expressive rather than a mimetic painter, but his work was expressive only insofar as the spectator was willing to collaborate.

[20] Peter Simonsen argues that under Beaumont's influence Wordsworth turned away from 'a visionary High Romanticism to a visual low Romanticism'. See *Wordsworth and the Word-Preserving Arts* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 78. Beaumont's letters suggest rather that the influence was mutual.

Wordsworth, William. 'The White Doe of Rylstone; or the Fate of the Nortons' (London, 1815), frontispiece engraving by J.C. Bromley from a painting by Sir George Beaumont. Reproduced by permission of The Wordsworth Trust.