

**Zeitschrift:** Colloquium Helveticum : cahiers suisses de littérature générale et comparée = Schweizer Hefte für allgemeine und vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft = quaderni svizzeri di letteratura generale e comparata

**Herausgeber:** Association suisse de littérature générale et comparée

**Band:** - (1997)

**Heft:** 25: From Rousseau to Wordsworth : what happened in European literature between 1770 and 1850?

**Artikel:** Wordsworth and the sonnet revival

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**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1006533>

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Frederick Burwick

## Wordsworth and the Sonnet Revival

The lyric form in which Francesco Petrarca had recorded, from 1327 to 1348, the agonies and ecstasies of his love for Laura was introduced into English poetry by Sir Thomas Wyatt and Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, in the sonnets published in Richard Tottel's *Miscellany* (1557). Throughout the ensuing century it remained a dominant lyric form that attracted virtually every major poet. Sir Philip Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella* (1591, 1598), Edmund Spenser's *Amoretti* (1595), William Shakespeare's *Sonnets* (1609) are but a few of the sonnet sequences that stand as literary triumphs of Elizabethan sonnetteering. Beginning in 1609, John Donne made the form an instrument of religious devotion in his *Holy Sonnets* (1635). A generation later, John Milton turned the sonnet into a clarion trumpet to rally political nationalism. Milton's "On the Late Massacre in Piedmonth" (1655) reveals a rhetorical power that had not been previously exerted in the sonnet's compact structure. After a century of dazzling virtuoso performances in the Italian form and in its English variations, the sonnet disappeared from the literary repertory.

After Milton, there ensued a century bereft of sonnets of significant merit<sup>1</sup>. Where the sonnet was publicly seen, it served a menial

- 1 Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1755): Sonnet, "a short poem, consisting of fourteen lines, of which the lines are adjusted by a particular rule"; "It has not been used by any man of eminence since Milton." Quoting Johnson's definition and his statement on the neglect of the sonnet during the century following Milton, Mary Robinson, in her Preface to *Sappho and Phaon* (1796), declares that she is "sensible of the extreme difficulty I shall have to encounter, in offering to the world a little wreath, gathered in that path, which even the best poets have thought it dangerous to tread." "Since the death of Doctor Jonson", she adds in her note to Johnson's Dictionary, "a few ingenious and elegant writers have composed sonnets", and she acknowledges Charlotte Smith (who, in turn refers to the sonnets of William Hayley)

office in dedicatory or occasional verses. In his essay on Alexander Pope (1756), Joseph Warton expressed the critical attitude of the age in dismissing Petrarch as “metaphysical and far fetched”<sup>2</sup>. The sonnet, however, was soon to have its resurgence in the new shape wrought by Charlotte Smith and Helen Maria Williams, a shape that, in its introspective absorption of the simplest artifacts of the domestic scene, became as intimately revelatory as the sonnets of Shakespeare and as meditative as the sonnets of Donne. In the hands of these women poets, the sonnet was gendered feminine and was transformed into a fitting mode for reflection on the lot of women in a male dominated society. The sonnet revival was marked by such publications as Helen Maria Williams’ *Poems* (1786), Charlotte Smith’s *Elegiac Sonnets* (1789), Mary Robinson’s *Sappho and Phaon* (1796), the six sonnets Anna Seward appended to her *Llangollen Vale* (1796) and her collection of one hundred published as *Original Sonnets on Various Subjects* (1799)<sup>3</sup>.

Following the lead of Charlotte Smith and Helen Maria Williams in reviving the sonnet, William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and other male poets confronted the problem of regendering it masculine. In March, 1787, the sixteen-year-old Wordsworth’s first published poem, “Sonnet on Seeing Miss Helen Maria Williams Weep at a Tale of Distress”, appeared in the *European Magazine*. He had not yet, at this date, met Helen Maria Williams, nor, except as recorded in her poetry, seen her weep. When, for example, Las Casas tells the tale of Aciloe’s suffering (*Peru*, Canto VI, ll. 307-313) and moves the cruel Alphonso to remorse, Aciloe falls to his feet

and William Kendall. *Sappho and Phaon*, London, Hookham and Carpeter, 1796; facsimile rpt. with Introduction by Terence Hoagwood and Rebecca Jackson, Delmar, NY, Scholars’ Facsimiles & Reprints, 1995, 7-9.

2 Joseph Warton, *Essay on the Genius and Writing of Pope* (vol. I, 1765; vol. II, 1782), 1:16.

3 Helen Maria Williams, *Poems*. 1786, facsimile reprint, Oxford, Woodstock, 1994; Charlotte Smith, *Elegiac Sonnets*. 1789, facsimile reprint, Oxford, Woodstock, 1992; *The Poems of Charlotte Smith*, ed. Stuart Curran, London, Oxford University Press, 1993; Anna Seward, *Llangollen Vale, with Other Poems*. 1796, facsimile reprint, Oxford, Woodstock, 1994; *Poetical Works of the Late Mrs. Mary Robinson*, ed. Maria Robinson, London, 1808; rpt. 1828.

and floods them with her tears. Wordsworth's sonnet responded to her evocation of sensibility and tenderness not simply by beholding her act of weeping but sharing in it: "Dim were my swimming eyes – my pulse beat slow,/ And my full heart was swelled to dear delicious pain" (ll. 3-4). The peculiarity of his sonnet, however, is that, in emphasizing her sensibility, he has totally repressed the fact that it exists in her poetry. She is recognized, then, not as a poet but merely as the agent of intense emotion.

Coleridge's first awareness of the sonnet revival, as he recollected years later in the *Biographia Literaria* (1817) seems less than ingenuous. Wordsworth, after all, did not neglect even in later years to give credit to Charlotte Smith and Helen Maria Williams. Coleridge, however, writes them out of the very movement which they had fostered. In the twelve "Sonnets on Eminent Characters", first published in the *Morning Chronicle* (December 1794 - January 1795), Coleridge endeavors to regender the sonnet masculine by addressing prominent male leaders of the age. Nevertheless, he engages the very feminine sensibility that his choice of subject would seek to avoid. In his account of William Pitt, the Prime Minister (1783-1801), Coleridge evokes sensibility:

Not always should the tear's ambrosial dew  
Roll its soft anguish down thy furrow'd cheek!  
Not always heaven-breath'd tones of suppliance meek  
Beseem thee, Mercy!

Unlike young Hercules between *vertus* and *voluptas*, Pitt between "Mercy" and "Justice" is to be chosen rather than to choose. Should "Justice" be blinded by the "strange trance" of political zeal, Coleridge has so defined the terms of Pitt's dilemma in this psychomachia, that "Mercy" is called upon to enforce her judgment:

But O! if some strange trance  
The eye-lids of thy stern-brow'd Sister press,  
Seize, Mercy! thou more terrible the brand,  
And hurl her thunderbolts with a fiercer hand!

Alongside his sonnets to the statesmen Pitt and Edmund Burke, Coleridge has also placed his tribute to the poet, William Lisle Bowles:



My heart has thanked thee, Bowles! for those soft strains  
 Whose sadness soothes me, like the murmuring  
 Of wild-bees in the sunny showers of spring.

In Bowles's sonnets, Coleridge claims to have discovered the "manliest melancholy". From Charlotte Smith, Bowles had appropriated the strategy of focussing on one specific object and imbuing it with her own emotions. As Coleridge himself acknowledges, Bowles has a "perpetual trick of *moralizing* every thing", not just "occasionally", but always and inevitably, describing the object in nature "by dim analogies with the moral world"<sup>4</sup>. In his "Introduction to the Sonnets", in *Poems, to Which Are Now Added, Poems by Charles Lamb and Charles Lloyd* (1797), Coleridge acknowledged Smith and Bowles together as "they who first made the Sonnet popular among the present English". They shared a method, he goes on to explain, of creating "a sweet and indissoluble union between the intellectual and material world"<sup>5</sup>. Although he admits in the *Biographia Literaria* to have been an avid reader of contemporary poets while still a school-boy at Christ's Hospital, it was not Smith's *Elegiac Sonnets* but the second edition of Bowles *Sonnets, Written Chiefly in Picturesque Spots* (1789) that "delighted and inspired" him with a style "so tender, and yet so manly, so natural and real, and yet so dignified and harmonious"<sup>6</sup>. Why, if he were not reading Bowles against the established precedence of Smith, would Coleridge find it necessary to insist on Bowles's "manly" style and his "manliest melancholy"? "Manliness" was not a criterion he felt compelled to urge in behalf of other poets whom he revered. Indeed, elsewhere in his criticism, "manhood" is evoked in the sense of maturity rather than masculinity, as when he asserts that the poet must "carry on the feelings of

4 *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 6 vols., ed. Earl Leslie Griggs, Oxford, Clarendon, 1956-71. To William Sotheby, 10 September 1802. 2:864.

5 Introduction to *Poems* (1797), in *The Complete Poetical Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 2 vols., ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge, Oxford, Clarendon, 1912. 2:1139-40.

6 *Biographia Literaria*, 2 vols., ed. James Engell and Walter Jackson Bate, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 7, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1983. 1:14,17.

childhood into the powers of manhood” and “combine the child’s sense of wonder and novelty with the appearances, which every day for perhaps forty years had rendered familiar”<sup>7</sup>. Coleridge’s emphasis upon Bowles’s “manliness” serves as a covert effort to relocate the sonnet revival within the work of male poets.

Although Wordsworth, too, was committed to a masculine regendering of the new sonnet of feminine sensibility, he was at least candid in acknowledging the accomplishments of Smith. As Duncan Wu points out in his study of the poet’s reading, Wordsworth most likely read Smith’s *Elegiac Sonnets* promptly after publication in 1784, and in “The Vale of Esthwaite”, composed three years later, he echoes a line from Smith’s sonnet, “To the South Downs”<sup>8</sup>. On his way to France in November 1791, the twenty-one-year-old Wordsworth visited the forty-two-year-old Smith at Brighton. She received him, he recollected, “in the politest manner”<sup>9</sup>. In his copy of her *Elegiac Sonnets*, Wordsworth copied two more of her sonnets which appeared in her novel, *Celistina* (1791)<sup>10</sup>. Variations in the text, however, suggest that he copied from a yet uncorrected manuscript which she showed him during his visit. Learning of his planned tour through France, she also provided him with a letter of introduction to her friend, Helen Maria Williams, then residing in Paris. Williams, however, had already departed when Wordsworth visited her lodgings in December, 1791<sup>11</sup>.

Wordsworth was responsive to those characteristics of Smith’s sonnets which had been observed by Coleridge, especially those sonnets “in which the moral Sentiments, Affections, or Feelings, are deduced from, and associated with the scenery of Nature” (71). What Coleridge did not mention, but Wordsworth clearly recognized and appreciated, was Smith’s tendency to invoke poetic precedence

7 *Biographia Literaria*, 1:80-81.

8 Duncan Wu, *Wordsworth’s Reading, 1770-1799*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993, p. 127.

9 Stephen Gill, *William Wordsworth. A Life*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1989, pp. 51, 433 n. 70.

10 Wu, p. 128.

11 Gill, pp. 57, 435 n. 104.m

in her emotional response. In her sonnets on the River Arun (5, 26, 30, 32, 33, 45), she gives tribute to the "British bards", Collins and Otway, who were natives to the region (33), recollecting how this same river had inspired "Otway's plaintive strain" (30) and imagining that she can hear Otway's "deep sighs" in the "sadden'd wind" (32). The strategy is not literary allusion for its own sake. Nature itself, Smith suggests, induces an emotional response to which the poets respond. With this same conviction Wordsworth gives tribute to John Dyer, the landscape painter and poet, whose *Grongar Hill* faithfully recorded the "living landscape" (Miscellaneous Sonnets I, xvii). Joseph Addison's narrative of "The Visions of Mirzah" (*Spectator*, No. 159, 1 Sept. 1711) is appropriated into Wordsworth's sonnet, where the visionary flutist of Baghdad haunts "the breeze/ Of harmony" atop the familiar Lakeland Fells (Miscellaneous Sonnets I, viii).

Smith alludes to other poets and also describes works of art to mediate emotional response in her sonnets. Several of her sonnets were written to accompany her own drawings of flowers: "To the Honorable Mrs. O'Neill, with Painted Flowers" (37), "To Dr. Parry of Bath, with some Botanic Drawings" (65), "Reflections on Some Drawings of Plants" (91). "The poet's fancy takes from Flora's realm", she acknowledges in the first of these, the metaphors for the charms of the female body. "But what gay blossoms", she goes on to ask, might provide "a just emblem of the lovely mind?" Just as her "mimic pencil" fails to capture the "glowing dyes" of an actual flower, so must the floral metaphor fail to provide an adequate image of the soul. The latter two sonnets give more attention to developing the ekphrastic trope, but the trope is not intended to conjure the visual presence of the drawing. Rather, as in the first of these sonnets, it confesses the inadequacy of the "botanic pencil's mimic powers". The poet's ekphrasis, just as in Wordsworth's description of Sir George Beaumont's painting of "Peele Castle", the trope is turned to elegiac purpose. Wordsworth used the ekphrasis in his "Elegiac Stanzas" on the death of his brother. Smith's description of her floral drawings are memorials to her own daughter who died in infancy. The painted flowers are reminders of the "deathless blossom" that will never bloom (45), the unpainted "portrait on my bleeding breast" (91).

Although Wordsworth wrote several sonnets on paintings, his tactic is to turn the ekphrasis to another purpose. His sonnet, "On a Portrait of the Duke of Wellington upon the Field of Waterloo", provides an attentive description of the painting, in which he takes the hint for his own elegiac tone: he sees in the subject's "time-worn face" not the flush of triumph but the "sad thoughts" of one "brought far nearer the grave's rest". His earlier sonnet "To B. R. Haydon" addresses the artist as one, who like the poet, is dedicated to "Creative Art/ (Whether the instrument of words she use, / Or pencil pregnant with ethereal hues)". His reason for recreating the painter's scene, as he declares in the concluding lines of the sonnet "Upon the Sight of a Beautiful Picture, Painted by Sir G. H. Beaumont", is to praise the capacity of the visual arts to capture the moment, to give "To one brief moment caught from fleeting time / The appropriate calm of blest eternity". While he is willing to grant a sublimity to the "frozen moment" as represented in the landscape, he is disconcerted by the temporal "arrest" he beholds in Margaret Gillie's portrait of himself with Mary Wordsworth (1839). He readily grants "the Likeness by thy skill portrayed", but goes on to declare that the artist cannot hope to replicate his own capacity to ignore the "changes Time has made" and to behold his wife "By the habitual light of memory". In his mind, she possesses a "bloom that cannot fade". His second sonnet, "On the Same Subject", revises his first judgment of the inadequacy of the portrait. He is now prepared to acknowledge its truth:

Morn into noon did pass, noon into eve,  
And the old day was welcome as the young,  
As welcome, and as beautiful – in sooth  
More beautiful, as being a thing more holy.

The union of sentiment with the object in nature, acknowledged by Coleridge as the distinctive attribute of the sonnets of Smith and Bowles, was an attribute that lent itself readily to parody. William Beckford, known for his novel, *Vathek, An Arabian Tale* (1786), and for his elaborate Gothic estate, Fonthill Abbey, had ridiculed the women sonneteers in his spoof of their genre, in "Elegiac Sonnet to a Mopstick":

Straight remnant of the spiry birchen bough,  
 That over the streamlet wont perchance to quake  
 Thy many twinkling leaves and, bending low,  
 Beheld thy white rind dancing on the lake –  
 How doth thy present state, poor stick! awake  
 My pathos – for, alas! even stripped as thou  
 May be my beating breast, if ever forsake  
 Philisto this poor heart; and break his vow.  
 So musing on, I fare with many a sigh  
 And meditating then on times long past,  
 To thee, lorn pole! I look with tearful eye,  
 As all beside the floor-soiled pail thou art cast;  
 And my sad thoughts, while I behold thee twirled,  
 Turn on the twistings of this troublous world<sup>12</sup>.

In spite of its parodistic choice of the mopstick as an image to be associated with a woman in her menial domestic role, Beckford employs a style and diction that is not unlike Smith's, and more aptly parodies the sonnets of Thomas Edwards or Henry Carey, who were also writing sonnets in the 1780's.

Wordsworth, for his part, fully endorsed the address to common nature he observed in Smith's River Arun sonnets. Constructing a sonnet out of the casual observations of a walk through the countryside, as in Smith's "To the South Downs" (5) or "Composed during a Walk on the Downs" (42), perfectly suited Wordsworth's manner of composition. Nor, as is evident in such sonnets as "The Wild Duck's Nest", did he find objects of nature, those too small or ordinary to radiate grandeur or sublimity, inappropriate for poetic contemplation.

A significant aspect of Wordsworth's re-gendering, however, is evident in his appeal to historical, cultural tradition. The feminine sonnet was personal, domestic, reclusive. Wordsworth makes a point of appealing to large national themes ("Milton! thou shouldst be

12 *The Life and Letters of William Beckford*, ed. Lewis Melville [= Lewis Saul Benjamin], London, W. Heinemann, 1910; rpt. Folcroft, PA, Folcroft Library Editions, 1970. For additional parodies see *Eblis, ou l'Enfer de William Beckford, suivi d'une anthologie de l'oeuvre [de W. Beckford] en ses meilleures pages*, ed. Marc Chadourne, Paris, J. J. Pauvert, 1967.



living"). For him, it is important to place Petrarch, Michelangelo, Camoens in the forefront of the sonnet tradition, to translate and imitate their style. His major accomplishment, however, was to adapt the octave/sestet Petrarchan division and give to the *volto* a dialectic function peculiar to his own poetry.

The *volto* in the Petrarchan sonnet traditionally exploits a rhetoric of antithesis and paradox. The conflict of frustrated desire expressed in the recurrent trope of *oxymoron*, with its "burning chills" and "freezing fevers", "pleasing pains" and "tender agonies", is also replicated in the structural *apocarteresis*, as the Petrarchan lover shifts from a logical to an emotional appeal, or from distraught passion to subdued calm. Rather than simply a *volto* or turn at the close of the octave, a full *voltafaccia* or about-face often redirects the subsequent movement of the sestet.

The oppositions of reason and passion, spirit and flesh, which give the Petrarchan sonnet its strategic tension, already had a venerable tradition in religious as well as in erotic literature: they are as crucial to the Book of Job as to the lyrics of Sappho. Indeed, many metaphors of sexual and spiritual enthusiasm are interchangeable. Meister Eckhart and other medieval mystics sought to express spiritual ecstasies through metaphors of libidinous excitement. The active interchange of sexual/spiritual reference allowed Donne to elaborate the "metaphysical" *double-entendre* in such poems as "The Relic" or "The Canonization", and he later turned the tenor and vehicle around again in his devotional prose. The "darkness visible" of *Paradise Lost* adapted the conceit of self-contradiction to express the inexpressible. In describing the robes of God as "Dark with excessive bright", Milton confronted the impasse of rendering the mystery of divine vision in a language engendered out of mundane experience.

In participating in this tradition and appropriating its conventions, Wordsworth adds his own peculiar dialectic thrust to the turn from octave to sestet. The *volto* in the Wordsworthian sonnet often marks the shift from the active to the contemplative crucial to his poetics. The "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" which are then "recollected in tranquillity" inform the structure as well as the narrative or descriptive content. The vital interchange of "startling"



and “hesitation” which he recommends in his “Reply to Mathetis”<sup>13</sup> reaffirms the “overseeing power/ To kindle or restrain” through which Nature is to fulfill its pledge to nurture the child Lucy: “Myself will to my darling be/ Both law and impulse”.

The Wordsworthian tropes of frustrated desire or exalted vision may differ radically from those of Petrarch or Milton, but the rhetorical strategies of paradox and contradiction are made to serve a very similar purpose. A simple yet remarkably elegant example is the declaration that a “prison” is “no prison” which provides the *volto* to the sonnet, “Nuns fret not at their convent’s narrow room”. As in his later “Scorn not the Sonnet”, this is a sonnet about the sonnet. Wordsworth defends the meditative space available “Within the Sonnet’s scanty plot of ground”.

In the octave, the poet demonstrates that a place of confinement may become a proper place of contemplation. The narrow chambers of nun, or hermit, or student, may seem physically confining, but they provide a secure and protective stability. “Maids at the wheel, the weaver at his loom” do not grow restive and discontent, but “Sit blithe and happy”. More pertinent to the task of the poet than the reclusive meditations of nun or hermit or student, than the blithe activity of spinning or weaving, are the humble bees, who blissfully surrender the freedom to “soar for the bloom,/ High as the highest peak of Furness-fells” in order to “murmur by the hour in foxglove bells”. To soar and to murmur reenact the movement of to kindle and to restrain. The fox-glove is for the bee what the sonnet is for the poet: the law to contain and govern the impulse; a coherent artifice which enables the poet to order the bewildering mass of detail or experience.

- 13 “Reply to Mathetis”, first published in Coleridge’s *The Friend* (14 Dec. 1809 and 4 Jan. 1810), in *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, 3 vols., ed. W. J. B. Owen and Jane Smyser, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1974. In response to the question posed by John Wilson (the “Christopher North” of Blackwood’s *Edinburgh Magazine* and the “Mathetis” of *The Friend*), Wordsworth states that no satisfactory preference for leading the active or the contemplative life is possible because in life “there is a startling and a hesitation”.

Because the confinement is self-willed, the semantic paradox is resolved in redefinition: "In truth the prison, unto which we doom/ Ourselves, no prison is". With this turn to the sestet, the sonnet explicitly reveals its self-reflexivity as sonnet about a sonnet. Its coherence may be restrictive, but it provides solace for "Souls .../ Who have felt the weight of too much liberty". Unlike the paradoxical declaration that a "prison" is "no prison", the *volto* in the sonnet, "Admonition", does not attempt to resolve, redeem, or redefine what it negates. The demonstration that a "Home" is "no home" is intended to stand in full support of the titular admonishing.

Ostensibly, the "Admonition" is addressed to "those who may have happened to be enamored of some beautiful place of Retreat, in the Country of the Lakes". It may reveal, nevertheless, the poet's own disenchantment with the ideal of home. Published in 1807, it may well have been composed during the period when the Wordsworths had moved from Grasmere to the farm-house at Coleorton. That the ideal of home is such an ephemeral notion certainly expresses a disappointment that contrasts with the homecoming sonnets of 1802. In his essay, "Wordsworth and the Sonnet: Building, Dwelling, Thinking", John Kerrigan has dealt with this and other Wordsworthian sonnets of home and dwelling places in terms of Heidegger's post-Nazi reconstructionism. According to Kerrigan's (not Heidegger's) argument, "Wordsworth's entire career was shaped by his need to find a dwelling-place which would not fade". Out of his desire for a place in which the mind might dwell, the poet had engendered a virtually edenic myth. In "A Farwell" he could celebrate that dwelling "whose seclusion deep/ Hath been so friendly to industrious hours", but, Kerrigan argues, Wordsworth gradually "lost his faith in crofts and cottages" and his fullest exposition of creative dwelling place, "Home at Grasmere", had to be abandoned<sup>14</sup>.

What interests me in this sonnet of "Admonition" is the way in which the idea of "Home" is rendered not just impalpable, but explicitly untouchable. It can exist only as idea. "The lovely Cottage

14 John Kerrigan, "Wordsworth and the Sonnet: Building, Dwelling, Thinking", *Essays on Criticism*, 35, no. 1, January 1985, 45-75.

in the guardian nook” may well brighten the viewer’s eye, but the poet warns that we ought not covet what we see. The *volto* sets forth the dilemma that to possess what we desire is to destroy the very conditions of desire: “Think what the Home must be if it were thine”. In the act of possession the home loses all its sanctity as ideal, “all that now enchants, from the day/ On which it should be touched, would melt away”. The sonnets of dwelling all betray a reflexive sense of the metaphor that implicates the very artifice of coherence and containment that is the sonnet itself<sup>15</sup>.

Wordsworth was not only conscious of the sonnet’s artifices of form and convention, he also found effective ways to exploit the artificiality. For example, in the sonnet on finding “The Wild Duck’s Nest” at Rydal Water, the description in the sestet of the duck’s nest as a carefully wrought dwelling place is made to contrast radically with the “bower” or “cell” of a the fairy-king’s consort described in the octave. The contrast between the fantastic and the natural, quite astonishingly, is achieved without repudiating the imagery of glittering treasures with which he has conjured the fairy dwellings. The shift from fantastic to natural is accomplished at the *volto* by shifting from metaphor to metonymy. I use these terms, here, in the sense of the polarity defined by Roman Jakobson<sup>16</sup>. Metaphor is that trope which calls upon the reader to imagine its referent as present; metonymy, however, reveals its figurative function and demands to be recognized as trope. In the octave, in spite of the appeal to the conventions of fantasy, the reader is invited to visualize a bejeweled retreat for the fairy-king’s pleasures:

The imperial Consort of the Fairy-king  
Owns not a sylvan bower; or gorgeous cell  
With emerald floored, and with purpureal shell  
Ceilinged and roofed; that is so fair a thing  
As this low structure

15 Lee M. Johnson, *Wordsworth and the Sonnet*, Copenhagen, Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1973, 63-88, on garden, cottage, architectural space as metaphor.

16 Roman Jakobson, “The Metaphoric and Metonymic Poles”, in Jakobson and Morris Halle, *Fundamentals of Language*, Janua linguarum, no. 1, The Hague, Mouton, 1956, ch. 5.

The sestet provides a description of a nest wrought with delicate care to fulfill the purpose of nesting. Wordsworth, however, has not abandoned his imagery of fairy treasures. Quite to the contrary, he has borrowed the fairy-king's crown. The figure no longer functions as a metaphor which is to be accepted perceptually or cognitively. We are not expected, that is, to imagine a duck preparing to lay an egg in a crown of gold and silver. Rather, we are to recognize the shift from the fantastic to the natural and, with that shift, to accept the trope merely as a trope.

The *volto*, in itself nothing more than the trite "Words cannot paint", is followed, as that trite phrase is always followed, with words which attempt to paint. In spite of its triteness, the *volto* imposes an attention to words which succeeds in bringing about a turn from the language of fairy tales.

Words cannot paint the oer'shadowing yew-tree bough,  
And dimly-gleaming Nest, – a hollow crown  
Of golden leaves inlaid with silver down,  
Fine as the mother's softest plumes allow:  
I gazed – and, self-accused while gazing, sighed  
For human-kind, weak slaves of cumbrous pride!

While we might be inclined to think that the sestet offers us better poetry than the octave, its operative figure of a gold and silver crown could not function without the shift from metaphor to metonymy. To be sure, Wordsworth exercises a mimetic bias that values the "golden leaves" and "silver down" of the duck's nest more than the emerald hall of the Fairy-king's imperial consort. But the efficacy of the sestet is fully dependent on the aesthetic strategy of the octave. The visual space in the octave is a specious retreat of fancy; in the sestet, it is a hidden space of protected nurturing. In spite of valorizing the latter, he observes it only as an intruder and interloper, much as the visitor to the Lakes whom he addresses in "Admonition". The former, however, is very much his own, albeit less the making of his own fancy than his heritage of literary convention. The self-reflexive closing lines return to the bondage of convention to castigate that "cumbrous pride" which holds human-kind in the blind slavery to artifice.

Edward Dowden, in his note on Wordsworth's grouping of the Miscellaneous Sonnets as they originally appeared in 1807, observes that, although the sonnets were augmented in subsequent editions, the poet endeavored to adhere to a thematic sequence in spite of additions and alterations<sup>17</sup>. A leit-motif which Dowden observes in the poet's arrangement of the sonnets is "contentment in limitation". The structural limitation of the sonnet becomes the sonnet's subject-matter. The nun's "narrow room" in the sonnet-about-the-sonnet is thematically implicated in many of the subsequent sonnets which turn reflexively upon the experience of enclosure and limitation. The description of dwelling place functions as a kind of synecdoche for the effort to lodge an idea within the fourteen-line structure. On the one hand, the effort is satisfying because it provides the security of form to shape and direct the poet's thoughts; and on the other, it is frustrating because even the simplest of thoughts resist the confinement of words. What one attempts to possess and contain will inevitably "melt away". What one fails to express, however, suffers much the same fate, for the images of the mind tend to fade unless they are anchored in the language of experience.

The poet is thus caught in a constant struggle of negotiating substance and shadow, permanence and impermanence, in metaphors that are neither and both. Coveting an abode that one cannot possess, the dilemma of "Admonition", could not be resolved even when one looked upon the stone cottages in the Lake Country. The dilemma, therefore, cannot be said to be either more or less resolvable when the mind's futile place-seeking endeavor turns to look upon the ephemeral architecture of clouds. Stone-cottages "melt away"; cloud-castles "fade away".

The sonnet, "Composed after a journey across the Hambleton Hills, Yorkshire" (October 4, 1802), expresses disappointment in having arrived too late upon the heights to enjoy the prospect which

17 Note on the Miscellaneous Sonnets, the Aldine Edition of Wordsworth's Poems (1892), ed. Edward Dowden, 3:237; reprinted in Wordsworth, *Poetical Works*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson, rev. Ernest de Selincourt, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1969, 703-4.



he and his companions (his bride Mary and his sister Dorothy) had hoped to view. They are treated, however, to a cloudscape lit by the setting sun, which the poet, not entirely able to convince himself, attempts to treat as “recompense” for the loss. “Many a glorious pile/ Did we behold”, the poet affirms at the beginning of the sestet, but even in the midst of declaring it a sight “that might well repay/ All disappointment”, he confesses the uneasy sense that the splendid images cannot be retained in memory: “they are of the sky,/ And from our earthly memory fade away”.

Citing these concluding lines in the sonnet that admits, “These words were uttered as in pensive mood”, Wordsworth continues the argument on what he now recognizes as a more profound dilemma: “the immortal Mind craves objects that endure”. Seeking to reject “gross delight/ And life’s unspiritual pleasures”, images that are “unstable as a dream of night”, he wants to find a permanent abode for mind:

Nor will I praise a cloud, however bright,  
Disparaging man’s gifts, and proper food.  
The Grove, the sky-built Temple, and the Dome,  
Though clad in colours beautiful and pure,  
Find in the heart of man no natural home.

In spite of his effort to cleave to palpable images that will not “melt away” or “fade away”, the sonnet closes with no alternative image, no “natural home” more secure than the airy architecture of clouds.

In the sonnets we have just examined, we have seen the poet consciously attentive to the artifice of image and form. While Wordsworth is not persistently writing sonnets about sonnets, he frequently calls attention to the artifice of form and language as a means of contending with the rigors of the sonnet. To forward an alternative reading of his metaphor – “prison” or “no prison”, “Home” or “no home” – is to expose the arbitrary nature of the metaphor. To call attention to metaphor is also to alter the very function of the trope, to shift from referential immediacy to reflexive distance, from metaphor to metonymy. A trope, we should recall, is a verbal turn (Greek *tropos* = turn) and, as such, accomplishes within the figurative word a shift that may well reinforce the *volto* from octave to sestet.



Samuel Levin, in *Metaphoric Worlds. Conceptions of a Romantic Nature*, insists that Wordsworth's metaphorical expression is neither imagistic nor propositional, but rather conceptual and cognitive. Levin is concerned with "the type of linguistic expression that ... involves a sort of crossing, in particular where a 'human' predicate is applied to a nonhuman object or aspect of nature" (p. 75). Such semantic "crossing" would seem likely to generate a metaphoric world dictated by the pathetic fallacy. The fallacy, however, is only semantic. It has no place, Levin argues, in the metaphoric world of Romantic nature. To avoid the fallacy we should shift the understanding of metaphor from language to conception. Levin proposes that we accept the epistemological consequences of the metaphor as a reference to a cognitive world in which nature is animate and shares human emotion<sup>18</sup>.

One problem with Levin's approach to the Wordsworthian metaphor is that he fails to take into account Wordsworth's own skeptical undermining of metaphor. Many of the sonnets are structured on precisely such a conscious disruption of a metaphor's claim to cognitive validity. In the late sonnet "Composed on the Banks of a Rocky Stream", the poet calls upon "Dogmatic Teachers" to ponder the lesson provided by the frothy foam which whirls in the eddies of the surging water:

as the Genius of the flood  
 Stoops willingly to animate and spur  
 Each lighter function slumbering in the brain,  
 Yon eddying balls of foam, these arrowy gleams  
 That o'er the pavement of the surging stream streams  
 Welter and flash, a synod might detain  
 With subtle speculations, haply vain.  
 But surely less so than your far-fetched themes!

Inviting us to compare the "eddyding balls of foam" with the speculations of "wrangling Schoolmen", the extended simile of this sonnet is

18 Samuel R. Levin, *Metaphoric Worlds. Conceptions of a Romantic Nature*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1988, 18-22.

drawn from the same critique of scholarly pretense that prompted him to describe “the grave Elders” of Cambridge as

men unsoured, grotesque  
In character, tricked out like aged trees  
Which through the lapse of their infirmity  
Give ready place to any random seed  
That chooses to be reared upon their trunks.  
(*Prelude* III, 542-546)

But it is not just for satirical purpose that Wordsworth chooses to expose the propositional nature of his imagery. He deliberately sustains double reference in the sonnet, “Pelion and Ossa”, in order to visualize Mount Skiddaw rising in the very space occupied by Mount Olympus. Similarly, in the sonnet “Aerial Rock”, the metaphorical reconstruction is allowed to overlay, without canceling or obscuring, the perception of the rock itself, “whose solitary brow/ From this low threshold daily meets my sight”. The fanciful reformation is consciously engaged as a kind of tribute. “How/ Shall Fancy pay to thee a grateful vow?” the poet asks, then closes the octave by transforming the “aerial rock” into an “imperial Castle”. As a poet who doubts the superiority and durability of man-made structures, his *volto* declares this to be an “Innocent scheme!” The rock remains a rock, even while fancy adds a “grace”, so that the eye may behold “votive Towers” when the rock catches “a gleam/ Of golden sunset”.

A typical Wordsworthian ploy is to forward multiple interpretations of a chance optical curiosity. Each successive metaphor remains tentative, yet each contributes to a cumulative definition. A pin-point of light seen “mid a black recess/ Of mountains” prompts a speculative sequence of similes which endeavor to interpret its meaning. After commencing with a rather frightening conjuration, “Even as a dragon’s eye”, the poet progresses through several homely transformations that ultimately affirm the domestic joy and security of home. The “dragon’s eye” is replaced by “a lamp/ Sullenly glaring through sepulchral damp”. The imagery of the octave remains shrouded in gloom, denying any “company/ To mitigate and cheer the loneliness”. The *volto* is a complete *voltafaccia*: “round the body of that joyless Thing”, the poet now places “A gay society with faces

bright/ Conversing, reading, laughing". The metaphorical shift is conducted with full consciousness of a mind warding off its own melancholy mood. He dispels the lowering glint of the "dragon's eye" and the sepulchral lamp looming in the darkness, and in its place sets a candle amidst an optimistic vision of home and happiness.

Levin's account of the Wordsworthian metaphor is unconcerned with such self-conscious manipulation. He is preoccupied, instead, with the romantic reaction against the mechanist physics of Newton and the functionalist epistemology of Locke. Coleridge, he notes, chose to celebrate Shakespeare and writers of the sixteenth and seventeenth century precisely because of their refusal to describe the mind as passive and the external world as *given*. The new aesthetic, forwarded by Kant in his *Critique of Judgment*, validated the conceptual capacities of language to combine reason and intuition.

In Wordsworth's poetry Levin finds the metaphorical fulfillment of that capacity to posit a conceptual world animated with mental vitality. When Wordsworth observes "a presence in the woods", or perceives "in all things ... one life", the metaphors refer literally to Wordsworth's conception of the world. While Levin is convincing in showing how Wordsworth elaborated this conceptual province into a poetry of the sublime, his account of metaphor ignores the poet's subtle alterations, shifting from simile to metaphor or from metaphor to metonymy.

The tensions of metaphor and metonymy are kept in delicate balance in the sonnet, "Composed by the Side of Grasmere Lake". The *volto* challenges the metaphor with the question, "Is it a mirror? – or the nether Sphere"? That the surface of the lake may be seen as a mirror the poet has already confirmed in the octave. Indeed, it is not simply the capacity of the still water to reflect the surrounding peaks that renders it mirrorlike, but also the illusion that its very fluidity has become solid and impermeable. Wordsworth refers to the transformation as "waters steeled/ By breezeless airs to smoothest polish". To the extent that we accept the perceptual equation of water with mirror, the sheen of "smoothest polish" is in perfect accord with the metaphor. When he reminds us, however, that we can also see through the surface, that the light refracts as well as

reflects, the figurative turn is turned once more. Thus in the *volto* the trope is troped.

The “vivid repetition of the stars” conjures an illusion of water transformed into a threshold through which we may behold “the nether Sphere/ Opening to view the abyss in which she feeds/ Her own calm fires”. Surface and depth, solid and fluid, exterior and interior alternate in a multi-stable illusion. No sooner has the water been “steeled” and “polished”, than the reflections on its seemingly impermeable surface render the surface itself invisible, so that it is impossible to distinguish above and below. There seems to be no surface at all, but only a vast opening into an interior cosmos. In the midst of this vision of the “calm fires” burning in the abyss, the poet hears the voice of “Great Pan”, who offers Wordsworth the Wordsworthian reassurance that, even “if unholy deeds/ Ravage the world, tranquillity is here”.

A similar turn to a world animated by mythic imagination provides the *volto* in the sonnet, “The world is too much with us”. The first four lines describe the demands of material existence which threaten to overwhelm all aspects of our being: “getting and spending, we lay waste our powers”. The more we are caught up in the economic exigencies of mercantile trade, the more we forfeit our sensibility and genial response to nature. We may labor in expectation of some reward for our service to Mammon, but we lose more than we gain: “We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!”

The next four lines observe a potential vitality of nature in which we no longer have the ability to participate. The scene is a moment of passive tranquillity, a calm prelude to impending action. “Getting and spending” has unfortunately numbed our capacities to feel what charge of latent energy awaits release:

This Sea that bares her bosom to the moon;  
The winds that will be howling at all hours,  
And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers;  
For this, for everything we are out of tune;  
It moves us not –

If anticipation is numbed, participation is impotent. We are not moved, not able to feel the consummating embrace of sea and

moon, nor the potential howling of the dormant breezes. The dilemma that has left *homo economicus*<sup>19</sup> heartless and unmoved prompts the poet, in a desperate oath, to evoke the mythic imagination of the heathen past, before humanity was compelled to obey the laws of commerce. While there is no hint that he blames religion for a dehumanizing market-place, he implicitly faults a Christianity that has lost its spiritual identity, its sense of divine presence in nature. Thus the *volto* voices the stunning paradox of calling upon God to be bereft of his Christianity: "Great God! I'd rather be/ A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn". This startling oath asks for a boon to invalidate the "sordid boon" of "getting and spending", to restore that pantheistic mode of perception capable of seeing an animating presence in every aspect of nature.

The abrupt oath that introduces the sestet is at once a structural turn, *volto*, and a turn in argument, *apocarteresis* (Greek *apo* = turn away from), "the casting away of all hope in one direction and turning to another for aid"<sup>20</sup>. The "Pagan" way of seeing, as condi-

19 This denomination of the human being, as motivated in all his or her actions by a sense of the economy or economics of those actions, provides the root metaphor of the work, *Homo Economicus* (1990), for which Gary Becker was awarded the 1992 Nobel Prize in economics.

20 Sister Mariam Joseph, *Shakespeare's Use of the Arts of Language*, New York, 1949, p. 390, cites the definition of *apocarteresis*: "a forme of speech by which the speaker signifieth that he casteth away all hope concerning some thing, & turneth it another way. *Job* ... signifieth that he hath no more hope of worldly prosperitie and comfort, and therefore he turneth the eye of his hope to heaven, saying: I know that my redeemer liveth, &c. Whereby he comforteth himself the better to indure & suffer so great and heavy a burthen of misery. *Job* 19.25. (from Henry Peacham, *The Garden of Eloquence*. London, 1577; corrected and augmented by the first author. London, 1593)". From Shakespeare, she also gives an example of *apocarteresis*, p. 249: "as when Hermione, seeing that Leontes is pre-convinced of her guilt, turns her hope to the gods".

It shall scarce boot me  
To say 'Not guilty'. Mine integrity,  
Being counted falsehood, shall, as I express it,  
Be so receiv'd. But thus: – if pow'rs divine  
Behold our human actions (as they do)  
I doubt not then but innocence shall make  
False accusation blush and tyranny  
Tremble at patience. (WT, 3.2.26).



tionally revived in the sestet, holds out a possibility of re-animating nature and restoring the wasted powers of mind. The erotic portent of the sea baring her bosom to the moon would then be consummated and the “up-gathered” winds released in a trumpet blast. What is called for is not the restoration of myth but of the poet’s capacity of mythic perception: to see Proteus, generative god of change, rise from the passionate embrace of sea and moon; to hear Triton call forth the slumbering winds with his shell-trumpet. Yet even the possibility of reviving the poet’s perception seems no more than a desperate wish. For all of its strong affirmation of a possible recuperation, “The world is too much with us”, remains a lament of lost power.

The sonnet, “How sweet it is”, proffers a very different argument. Just as too little imagination may be numbing, too carefree an indulgence of the imagination is dangerous. This latter credo may well sound a bit like Dr. Johnson’s caveats against “listening with credulity to the whisperings of fancy”<sup>21</sup>. In fact, it is crucial to Wordsworth’s own sense of the balanced interchange of “startling” and “hesitation”. In the octave he describes the seductive influence of the imagination in two feminine images: “mother Fancy” and “a bold Girl”. Nature is metaphorically eroticized not with the aloof voyeurism of witnessing “This Sea that bares her bosom to the moon”, as in “The world is too much with us”, but rather with the voluptuous luxuriation of the boy in “Nutting”, who ravages virgin nature. The seductive movement, however, is halted with the *volto*, which prompts the poet’s self-reflexive awareness of his own metaphorical self-indulgence. He allows himself to be mocked, that is, by his own fanciful images.

With the opening declaration, “How sweet it is”, the octave seems to welcome the voluptuous indulgence, “when mother Fancy rocks/ The wayward brain”. Amidst the “lovely brood” of “Tall trees, green arbours, and ground-flowers in flocks”, the poet accepts the

21 Opening line of *Rasselas*; Johnson makes a similar argument on the dangers of the imagination in *Rambler*, Nos. 5 and 203, and in *Idler*, No. 58; *The Works of Samuel Johnson*, 16 vol., Cambridge, MA, Harvard Cooperative Society, 1912, 1:27; 4:182; 5:382-3; 7:7.



invitation of the “delicious stream” and allows the transforming imagination to play its frolic game. A “wild rose tip-toe upon hawthorn stocks” becomes, in the poet’s reflexive simile, “Like a bold Girl, who plays her agile pranks/ At Wakes and Fairs with wandering Mountebanks”. The climax of her antic performance is achieved as “she stands cresting the Clown’s head, and mocks/ The crowd beneath her”. The “wayward brain” may have turned a “wild rose” into a “bold Girl”, but it is an illusion that mocks the beholder.

With the phrase, “Verily I think”, the sestet turns to appraise the power of illusion to beset the mind with a “sweet” but spurious perception of reality. We hear the same cautionary note that Wordsworth repeated to Isabel Fenwick, when he confessed that as a boy he had often been so entranced by ideal vision that he would have to clutch a wall or a tree to reconfirm a palpable reality<sup>22</sup>. The “old place” hidden in the woods is not simply a place which stimulates the poet’s dream; the place has itself become “like a dream”, a dream so compelling that it seems a “map of the whole world”. This secluded place has achieved its awesome power, the poet acknowledges, precisely because his mind in dwelling there readily yields to its seduction:

thoughts, link by link,  
Enter through ears and eyesight, with such gleam  
Of all things, that at last in fear I shrink,  
And leap at once from the delicious stream.

The frolic game, to which the “wayward brain” has too indulgently acquiesced, is abruptly halted. The poet leaps from “the delicious stream” to temper the overwrought excitement of the senses.

The structural turn of the *volto*, as I have been describing it up to this point, is supported by three kinds of poetic turn: the figurative turn of the trope; the argumentative turn or *apocarteresis*; the reflexive turn in which the artifact addresses or mimics itself. Reflexivity, as I have noted, is developed thematically in a number of

22 Note to “Ode: Intimation of Immortality”, in the notes Wordsworth dictated to Isabella Fenwick, Winter 1842-1843.

sonnets on dwelling place. In the sonnets on *Independence and Liberty*, Wordsworth thematically implicated another sort of turn, the ideological turning or overturning of governments. As a poetic form especially appealing to "Souls .../ Who have felt the weight of too much liberty", the sonnet may seem an inappropriate poetic vehicle for sounding the clarion note of revolution. Wordsworth knew, however, that the sonnet was well capable of rallying the people, and he gives tribute to the poet who mastered the sonnet's ideological potential in "Milton! thou shouldst be living at this hour". In Milton's hand, he acknowledges in "Scorn not the Sonnet", "The Thing became a trumpet; whence he blew/ Soul-animating strains".

Wordsworth's own best efforts at political statement in the sonnet, however, are more elegiac than clarion. "I grieved for Buonparté" is meditative rather than militant. Because he could exercise a resurgent energy through the structural *volto*, Wordsworth confidently reaffirms the revolutionary ideal even after his own turn from revolutionary politics. The explanation, I think, is that the reflexive interiority of the sonnet provided the poet with a sequestered sanctuary in which he could reiterate his own earlier revolutionary thoughts.

Thus in his tribute to "Toussaint, the most unhappy man of men!" he could resurrect the hero of the revolution in St. Domingo. "Though fallen thyself, never to rise again", Wordsworth declares in the *volto*, Toussaint may "Live, and take comfort", for "Thou hast left behind/ Powers that will work for thee". The unvanquished revolutionary spirit is also affirmed in the sonnet, "We had a female Passenger", where the "white-robed Negro" is described as "down-cast as a woman fearing blame;/ Meek, destitute, as seemed, of hope or aim". Again, it is in the sestet that Wordsworth adds the telling revelation: "Yet still her eyes retained their tropic fire". Outwardly she may seem subdued; within the revolutionary flame is still "burning independent of the mind".

Wordsworth turned to the sonnet with full appreciation of its conventions and constraints. He did not rebel against its "scanty plot of ground", but made full use of the order and cohesion that its tight structure could impose upon the creative process. A sonnet, of course, does not write itself, and no one who has tried to produce a sonnet will pretend that it is easy to say something beautiful or

profound simply by adhering to its formal conventions. But when Wordsworth had something beautiful or profound to say, he found that he could invest his statement with poignant authority by entering into the sonnet's confined space. The very limitation must have contributed to his feeling of the sonnet's concentrated power, or else he might have been inclined to abandon the rigorous demands of the Petrarchan sonnet for the more flexible quatrains of the Shakespearean sonnet, or, like Keats or Shelley, to exercise his own experimental variations on its fourteen-line structure.

In fact, the octave-sestet movement was perfectly adaptable to the Wordsworthian dialects of "startling" and "hesitation", "law and impulse", observation and reflection. Furthermore, as formal artifice, the sonnet allowed the poet, more than anywhere else in his poetry (the Prologue to *Peter Bell* is a notable exception), to flaunt the condition of artificiality and to shift back and forth between mimetic representation and reflexivity. His extreme consciousness of the sonnet's structural space is evident in the recurrent theme of dwelling. The enabling instrument in shifting attention from a metaphor to the artificiality of its pretense, and in turning from the outer to the inner world, from the active to the meditative mode, is the *volto*. The turn from octave to sestet provides Wordsworth crucial leverage to move within the sonnet's "narrow room".

During the Elizabethan period, Wyatt, Surrey, Sidney and Shakespeare made the sonnet the dominant form of lyric expression in England. It had to be re-invented, as it were, in the generations that followed – but after the ingeniously intricate sonnets of Donne, and the clarion voice of the Miltonic sonnet, there followed a full century in which the sonnet vanished. Not until the 1780's was the sonnet restored to a place of prestige, when Smith, Robinson, Williams, and Seward adapted it to their own personal circumstances and experiences. The male poets who recognized and endeavored to appropriate the new sensibility of these sonnets discovered that if they wanted to assert a masculine voice and identity in the sonnet it would be necessary to regender the form. Wordsworth avoided the Shakespearean model and returned to the Italian form, and he made Petrarch's *volto* a spring-trap for his subject-object dialectics.

## Résumé

Définissant le sonnet dans son *Dictionary*, Samuel Johnson relève que “cette forme n’a été utilisée par aucun homme de lettres éminent depuis Milton”. Dans les années 1780, Charlotte Smith et Helen Maria Williams furent à l’origine d’un renouveau du sonnet dans lequel elles introduisirent une voix spécifiquement féminine. Elles utilisèrent la structure du sonnet, formé d’un huitain et d’un sizain, pour engager un dialogue entre le sujet et la nature. Wordsworth, intrigué par les possibilités d’intégration de l’introspection offertes par cette nouvelle application du sonnet de Pétrarque, l’adopta pour son propre usage, s’efforçant parfois de re-masculiniser la voix poétique, se contentant souvent d’adopter la sensibilité féminine. Sa contribution majeure au renouveau du sonnet se caractérise par un recours emphatique à la *volta* et une réflexivité du sujet plus soutenue.

