

Mark Sandy

“Ghostly Language”: Spectral Presences and Subjectivity in Wordsworth’s *Salisbury*

*Plain Poems*

The music bursteth into second life;  
The notes luxuriate, every stone is kissed  
By sound, or ghost of sound...

(William Wordsworth, Sonnet XXXIV)

And of ourselves and of our origins,  
In ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds.

(Wallace Stevens, “The Idea of Order at Key West”)

Wordsworth’s modification of “sound” to the “ghost of sound” captures the elusive, yet somehow palpable, effects of twilit music.<sup>1</sup> Wordsworth’s phrase might seem commonplace enough, but its ghostly manifestation of a sound that is barely perceptibly as sound at all speaks tellingly to Romanticism’s spectral presences, past, present, and future. “Romanticism”, as Marc Redfield observes, “marks the historical moment of spectrality” which allegorises its own moment of haunting and all those subsequent hauntings of futurity.<sup>2</sup> These spectral or ghostly presences, as Wordsworth realises through the synaesthetic touch of music in Sonnet XXXIV, are as intangible as they are persistent, as strange as they are intimate, as possible as they are impossible. This sense of the ghost as a mere echo or repetition of nothing (a virtual non-sound or non-entity) voices the conditionality of a ghost; an insubstantial yet

definite form, a phantasmal figure that gestures (with empty sleeves) towards its non-existent, but very real persistent presence in the past, present, and future moment of its own haunting.

### **“Haunted by Meaning”: Romanticism, Wordsworth, and Spectres**

Romanticism as a haunted and haunting presence becomes, as Paul de Man comments on the poetry of Charles Baudelaire, “the ghostly memory of mourned absences”.<sup>3</sup> Certainly, Friedrich Nietzsche (one spectre who haunts de Man’s critical work)<sup>4</sup> is attuned to the familiarity and unfamiliarity of these haunted and haunting “mourned absences” when he observes that in the moment:

We greatly transform ourselves, those friends of ours who have not been transformed become ghosts of our past: their voice comes across to us like the voice of a shade”.<sup>5</sup>

Implicit in Nietzsche’s aphoristic comment on “friends as ghosts” is a sense of the self perturbed by the “voice” of its spectral other; a haunting sense of otherness that, anticipating a Freudian notion of the uncanny (*unheimlich*), renders the subject both estranged from itself and unhoused. On this account we can conceive of the language and subjectivity of Romanticism, in relation to Jacques Derrida’s writing on “Force and Signification”, as the “architecture of an uninhabited or deserted city” populated only by ghosts:

A city no longer inhabited, not simply left behind, but haunted by meaning and culture. The state of being haunted, which keeps the city from returning to

nature, is perhaps the general mode of the presence or absence of the things itself in pure language itself.<sup>6</sup>

Post-Romantic writing about subjectivity is unsettled by a dual sense of Romanticism as a haunted site and the source of numerous subsequent hauntings. The presence of these Romantic hauntings is felt through the post-Romantic poetry of Wallace Stevens. Spectral presences echo in those “keener sounds” of Stevens’s “ghostly demarcations” where the “origins” of “ourselves” are traced back to Romantic “fragrant portals, dimly starred”.<sup>7</sup> The closing movement of Stevens’s “The Idea of Order at Key West” is haunted in two distinct but inter-related ways (one verbal or textual, the other conceptual) which illuminate, more generally, my chapter’s following account of spectral presences and subjectivity in Wordsworth’s poetry. Firstly, whether through deliberate or accidental echo, haunting occurs as a conscious or unconscious literary allusion so that Steven’s “fragrant portals” are amplified and disturbed by the verbal spectre of Keats’s “magic casements”.<sup>8</sup> Secondly, Steven’s post-Romantic attempt to trace out the “origins” of our subjectivity turns out to be haunted by the spectral presences of Romanticism’s own anxious fascination with a fragile interiority, often itself alert to the potential vacuity of the self. For Stevens, like other post-Romantic writers and thinkers, the Romantic is a necessary spectre which should never have been, but always remains.

Wordsworth’s spectres and the ghostly qualities of his own poetry have not gone unnoticed. Geoffrey Hartman’s seminal account of *The Unremarkable Wordsworth* notes the “feeling of ghostliness”<sup>9</sup> that haunts Wordsworth’s poetics of the ordinary. With a focus on social concern and commodities, David Simpson offers a reading,

refracted through Derrida's *Specters of Marx*, of Wordsworth's poetry and "the ghostliness of things".<sup>10</sup> Reconceived through psychoanalysis and a post-Derridean literary theory, Mary Jacobus understands Wordsworth and the Romantic lyric as encountering the import, weight (emotional, psychic, or physical), and gravitation of those things real and spectral, sensible and insensible, material and immaterial. For Jacobus, the Wordsworthian lyric recognises that "Even breathing becomes breathing toward death, just as the gift of a poem becomes a form of conversing with the dead."<sup>11</sup> Wordsworth emerges as an existential poet of encounters with mourning, loss, grief, and the limitations of our fragile and spectral existences.

#### **"A Word, Ghost-Like, Survives": *Salisbury Plain* and Spectral Voices**

These existential encounters, ghostly exchanges, and spectral presences populate Wordsworth's *Salisbury Plain* poems. Originally composed by Wordsworth in 1793, *Salisbury Plain* was published in one version as "The Female Vagrant" in 1798 and subsequently revised as "Guilt and Sorrow; or, Incidents upon Salisbury Plain" in 1842.<sup>12</sup> "Human grief oppressed" (*Salisbury Plain*, 269) formed the subject of material (first conceived of as "A Night on Salisbury Plain", then *Salisbury Plain*, and later "Adventures on Salisbury Plain"), which Wordsworth revisited several times, although never brought to a satisfactory artistic resolution, over the course of his poetic career. This composition and re-composition constitute in itself a kind of textual haunting. Providing the kernel to these haunted narratives is a ghostly male form (barely a physical semblance of his former self), who walks the earth, condemned by his crime and guilt, as the already dead spectre he is and will become.<sup>13</sup>

Through a “ghostly language”<sup>14</sup> of fear and wonder, of primordial spectral presences and voices, Wordsworth’s poetic vision in *Salisbury Plain* oscillates between nature’s compensatory power and unsympathetic indifference to grief. Wordsworth’s adoption of Spenserian stanzas and its attendant genre of romance heighten this tension between tragic disclosure and fictional consolation in *Salisbury Plain*, where the reader detects an uneasy relation between the poem’s romance form and its subject matter. This tension can be construed, in Nietzsche’s terms, as the haunting of the Apollonian dream of romance by a Dionysian tragic reality.<sup>15</sup> As Wordsworth knew the romance genre had a reputation for courting aesthetic, political, and social controversy, as well as exploring the uneasy relation between the real and spectral; or, in Stuart Curran’s words, “the probable and the improbable”.<sup>16</sup> Wordsworth’s early attempt to write romance (at a time of enormous personal upheaval and with a pressing awareness of harsh social realities) taxed a genre already acquainted with the complex dynamic between history and imaginative invention.<sup>17</sup>

Lost in a storm (a metaphor for natural, social, spiritual, and psychic disorder) without hope, bearings, shelter or a home, Wordsworth’s traveller, in *Salisbury Plain*, is both a haunted and haunting figure subject to the merciless elements and spectral presences (whether supernatural or superstitious forces) of the vastness of Salisbury Plain that threaten to fracture his subjectivity:

The troubled west was red with stormy fire,  
O’er Sarum’s plain the traveller with a sigh  
Measured each painful step, the distant spire

That fixed at every turn his backward eye  
 Was lost, tho' still he turned, in the blank sky.  
 By thirst and hunger pressed he gazed around  
 And scarce could any trace of man descry,  
 Save wastes of corn that stretched without a bound,  
 But where the sower dwelt was nowhere to be found. (stanza 5)

Wordsworth's traveller offers a prototype to the spectral death-in-life figures of Lucy Gray and the Discharged Solider, whose fragile subjectivities materialise and dematerialise in and out of existence on the periphery of our perception.<sup>18</sup> Here Wordsworth's narrator focuses on the traveller's own disintegrating subjectivity and alienated condition amidst the "vacant" scene overlooked by a "blank sky", as well as his desperate revenant-like impulse to return home; even if that the home is irretrievably lost to him and he is irrevocably damned by his past actions. The narrator's portrayal of the sheer blankness "without any trace of man descry" of the "huge plain around him [the traveller] spread" (43, 62), repeatedly, reminds the traveller there is no sign of a "homeward shepherd" (6, 50), place 'where the sower dwelt' (45), or even the gypsy's "straw-built home" (13, 112). The exhausted traveller's misfortune not to stumble across a hidden "cottage whither his tired feet might turn", (57) leaves him exposed to the infernal eastern "stormy fire" and an obdurate nature that painfully points to his "unhouzed" (1, 1) condition. By contrast to Wordsworth's traveller, even the crows "in blackening eddies" are "homeward borne" (7, 58) and the bustard is presented as a "shy tenant" (8, 69) of its environs. The traveller's "unhouzed" state registers a physical loss of dwelling, security, ownership,

as well as an existential dread about no longer belonging to those conventional social or religious orders that guarantee psychic or spiritual comfort and physical safety.

From the moment that Wordsworth's traveller lost his bearings in the storm and the cardinal point of Salisbury Cathedral (whose "distant spire was / That fixed at every turn his backward eye / Was lost" (5, 38-40)), he became physically vulnerable to the elements and mentally susceptible to spectral presences and the pagan world of superstition:

The Sun unheeded sunk, while on a mound  
 He stands beholding with astonished gaze,  
 Frequent upon the deep entrenched ground,  
 Strange marks of mighty arms of former days,  
 Then looking up at distances surveys  
 What seems an antique castle spreading wide.

...wile to those walls he hied

A voice as from a tomb in hollow accents cried... (9, 72-8; 80-1)

This pre-Christian world of druidic ritual and human sacrifice is represented by both the "antique castle" of Stonehenge (accidentally stumbled upon by the traveller) and the faceless and formless "voice" (10, 100) which, through a "ghostly language", tells of "priests and spectres grim and idols dire" (93). This spectral voice, petrifying the traveller, arose "as from a tomb in hollow accents" to speak of, and from, the dead of this place that date back to and beyond Heathen times. These ghostly tales of the dead (and of the grief of those who out live them) find expression in the fragmentary

narratives of their departed presences told by a disembodied spectral voice which, like those of whom it tells, is anchored to this specific site. To borrow Nietzsche's phrase this "voice of a shade", tethered to this abandoned place, finds an affinity with Derrida's "site of being haunted" and as such is suggestive about the machinations of Wordsworth's "ghostly language". Wordsworth's "ghostly language" conjures up a spectre of a forgotten past only to obliterate its original form in the moment of its projected future as a spectral presence. Like any haunting, Wordsworth's "ghostly language" relies upon a future projected anti-self or imagined other that "will be my second self when I am gone" (*Michael*, 39).

In this sense, the retelling and reshaping of the specific details of a particular historic episode perform a kind of erasure in which the indecipherable "strange marks...of former days" (*Salisbury Plain*, 9, 76) find meaning not in their original sense, but in the stories and superstitions that grow up around them (as in the cases of Lucy Gray and Martha Ray) and are passed down as part of a communal "ghostly memory of mourned absences" from generation to generation. The process of transmitting these translations or mistranslations of the significance of these "strange marks" point towards those, inevitable, difficulties of partial perspectives, understandings, and misunderstandings vital to Wordsworth's pastoral poems (including *The Ruined Cottage*, "The Thorn", and *Michael*) and their treatment of loss, grief, and ghostly memory.

In *Salisbury Plain*, a "ghostly language" of personal and communal narratives converges on the single geographic feature of Salisbury Plain. In the 1805 version of *The Prelude*, Wordsworth's earliest impressions of Salisbury Plain and Stonehenge

testify to his own sense of its ancient monuments, druidic ritual, and geography as belonging to “both worlds, the living and the dead” (XII, 336). The primordial presence of Stone Henge and its environs in *Salisbury Plain*, at least according to one narrative point of view, has its own ghostly voice and tale to tell. Although whether the haunting voice, which speaks of the dead and Salisbury Plain’s pagan past, is the work of a transcendent force, or the superstitious susceptibility of the narrator, or the debilitated subjectivity of the traveller remains indeterminate within the fractured frames of Wordsworth’s *Salisbury Plain*:

‘Twas dark and waste as ocean’s shipless flood  
 Roaring with storms beneath night’s starless gloom...  
 No transient meteor burst upon his sight  
 Nor taper glimmered dim from sick man’s room.  
 Along the moor no line of mournful light  
 From lamp of lonely toll-gate streamed athwart the night.  
 (13, 109-10; 113-16)

Whatever the source of this “ghostly language” heard by the traveller, it only reminds him of his past losses and current physical and psychic vulnerability adrift and unable to navigate the plain’s “dark and waste as ocean’s shipless flood” in the storm’s “starless gloom”. This extended metaphor is haunted by Wordsworth’s substitutions, in other versions of this poem, for the traveller with a Sailor returned from war. That the traveller, in this early version of the poem, is utterly bereft of any sign of human dwelling or social contact is further symbolised by the absence even of “a mournful light / From lamp of lonely toll-gate”. The absent-presence of the “mournful” lamp-

light poignantly resonates with the dimly lit “sick man’s room” in the previous line and the earlier description of the momentary illumination of the “lightning” as “abortive” (12, 107). Through a culmination of these funereal adjectives across stanzas 12 and 13, Wordsworth plays to the existential predicament of the traveller, who comes to question his right to a human dwelling and even whether (hinting at his ever-increasingly ghostly condition) he is worthy of a place amidst the community of the living at all. Consequently, Wordsworth’s traveller is driven as a vacant self “with flight unwilling, / Worn out and wasted, wishing the repose / Of death” (14, 119-20).

This “wasted”, spectral, figure of the traveller (who rendered as a Sailor and war veteran in Wordsworth’s alternative versions) is closer in type to the Discharged Soldier. Appropriately, Wordsworth’s traveller finds shelter from the tempest’s “night-terrors” (14, 124) in the most inhospitable of places rife with superstition (as the bestowing of the name suggests), where “no human being could remain / And now the walls are named the dead house of the plain.” (14, 125-6) There the traveller encounters a “female wanderer” (16, 138)—later recast by Wordsworth in “The Female Vagrant”—who has her own story of familial decline, personal tragedy, lost love, and homelessness to relate. Her manner of narration is characterised—recalling the poem’s earlier funereal imagery—as one of a “mourner [who] thus her artless story told” (26, 227). Her narrative holds up a mirror to the traveller’s own experience of “unhoused” exposure to the natural elements in the storm.<sup>19</sup> Like the traveller, the wanderer derives little consolation from nature for her “loss, which rolling suns shall ne’er restore” (25, 223). In this version of nocturnal happenings in *Salisbury Plain*, the “dead house” provides a point of convergence for the ghostly traveller’s implicit, third person, tale of destitution and the grief-stricken wanderer’s explicit, first person,

story of domestic decline, the tragic involvement of her husband and their children in the war in the Americas and, after their deaths, forced vagrancy on her return to Britain. In their complementary, although very different, narrative modes neither tale independently offers any consolation for the loss they describe. But the uncanny doubling that exists between the respective subjects and themes of their tales echo the silent sympathy that passes between the male traveller and female wanderer. Conversing in a “ghostly language” of their own, the male traveller and female wanderer become the imagined other or “second self” of one another’s ghost stories. This spectral doubling evokes and obliterates past horrors, transforming these dual tales of ruin through a pivotal shift in focus away from the “weary night so / Ruinous [to some] far other scene to view” (38, 334-5).

This spectral and sympathetic doubling of these narratives of loss is anticipated by the arcane and mystic affinities that exist between the geographic feature of the Spital and Stonehenge. Echoing the traveller’s terrifying and disturbing encounter with Stonehenge, the female wanderer reveals her own apprehension and trepidation (in part fuelled by superstition) when she first approached the Spital, for “of that ruin she had heard a tale / That might with a child’s fear the stoutest hearts assail” (16, 144). Her first reaction of “sudden dread” (16, 142) and suspicion of the traveller is governed by those “tales of the lone Spital she had learned” (18, 154), but these anxieties soon give way to a recognition of a “greeting kind” and human connection between them; bound as they are by grief and their isolate wanderings on the vast wastes of “Sarum’s plain” (5, 38). Within their ghostly exchange of tales—as “they conversed of that desert ground” (18, 160)—we hear both snatches of those superstitious tales about the Spital and further ghostly stories connected with

Stonehenge relayed by the wanderer from her chance meeting with an “Old” man (19, 170). Through these retellings of stories framed within stories, we are also permitted to glimpse a transformative “pleasing light”—qualitatively distinct from the lightning’s “abortive beam” (12, 106) or the moon’s “sickly glare” (14, 119)—that has been absent until this point in *Salisbury Plain*.

**“The Ghost of a Forgotten Form”: *Salisbury Plain* and Haunted Romance**

This change in the quality of light translates the lurid and nightmarish spectres of the plain into benign “long bearded forms with wands uplifted” (22, 191) whose rituals on the ‘mystic plain’ usher in the quiet of night as a “prelude to sweet sounds” (22, 197). A similar ‘pleasant sound’ reoccurs in *The Prelude* (1805), when Wordsworth, recollecting wandering on Salisbury Plain, recounts the “antiquarian’s dream” of “bearded Teachers, with white wands / Uplifted / pointing to the starry sky” (XII, 348-50). Such sounds may speak to the potentially restorative powers of the “ghostly language of the ancient earth”. This mystical and symbolic ushering in of the muted “breath of night” (22, 193) provides a barometer for the break in the weather on the plain—when “the churlish storms relent” (23, 199) with “dying wind” (23, 200)—and gauges the temperament of the Spital’s interior scene marked by the empathetic silence (a hopeful sign that some residual subjectivity remains intact) of the traveller as the sole confidante to the wanderer’s “sad tale” (39, 351) of grief.

Wordsworth’s symbolic transition from the turbulent storm to becalmed dawn<sup>20</sup>, as well as the described change in, and transformative quality of, the moonlight is suggestive of *Salisbury Plain*’s own haunting by the magical powers of romance. This transformation intimates the poem’s crucial and imaginative transition under the

sympathetic direction of the traveller to cast our eyes upon a less “Ruinous / far other scene” (38, 334-35). Daybreak reveals to the traveller and wanderer, now making their way together after taking leave of the Spital, a correspondingly “pleasant scene” of a valley that proffers the comfortable shelter and hospitality of a cottage-dwelling with “homely bread” (47, 420) and fresh milk in abundance:

But now from a hill summit down they look  
 Where through a narrow valley’s pleasant scene  
 A wreath of vapour tracked a winding brook  
 Babbling through groves and lawns and meads of green. (46, 406-9)

Against the odds, the pastoral realm of romance seems to have successfully fended off a nightmarish world of darker realities. This positive movement and potential resolution within *Salisbury Plain* works itself out through a pattern of nature’s calming and restorative powers that Wordsworth had tentatively sketched nearly seven years before its composition.<sup>21</sup> Wordsworth’s sonnet, “Written in Very Early Youth”, traces a similar trajectory from the blankness of nature’s night sky to a realisation of nature’s homely, comforting, sustaining, and rejuvenating power:

Dark is the ground; a slumber seems to steal  
 Oe’r vale, and mountain, and the starless sky.  
 Now, in this blank of things, a harmony,  
 Home-felt, and home-created, comes to heal  
 That grief for which the sense will supply  
 Fresh food; for only then, when memory

Is hushed, am I at rest. (5-11)

In *Salisbury Plain*, Wordsworth's symbolic movement from night to day, from tempest to calm, whether intentionally or not echoes this earlier sonnet. Wordsworth, as Kurt Fosso notes, envisions in *Salisbury Plain* his social outcasts as a version of Spenser's errant knight and his lady who, finally, become the rightful inheritors of a spiritual and material wholesome land and community of plenty.<sup>22</sup> But this cornucopia of reintegration into society and domestic harmony is unsettled by the very Spenserian and Miltonic allusions upon which it is founded. The shadowy world of socio-political reality continues to haunt even the most brilliant bowers of bliss.

In this respect, the closing sequence of Wordsworth's *Salisbury Plain* provides an instance of textual haunting that is manifest through deliberate or accidental evocations of those spectral presences of Spenser and Milton. Even before the narrator's fond farewell to this "friendless hope-forsaken pair" (47, 415) and his lengthy discourse on the evils and injustices of society, Wordsworth's use of romance motif and Miltonic allusion quietly undermines any possible vision of serenity or security for the traveller and wanderer. As the world of romance works its transformative magic through the "pleasing light" of "clear moons" (22, 190), in the pivotal stanza of *Salisbury Plain*, Wordsworth's verbal choices in his description of how "the moon *beguiles* and *charmed* for many a league the hoary desert" (*emphasis added*, 22,198) again reminds us of the hoodwinking capacity of Spenserian romance, where those beguiling paradisaal bowers often turn out to be no more than a conjuror's trickery; an Apollonian dream disturbed by the spectre of Dionysian reality.<sup>23</sup> Equally, an ominous foreboding is suggested by the spectral presence of Milton, who

haunts the verbal texture of Wordsworth's depiction of the final scenes of the traveller and wanderer to recall Adam and Eve in *Paradise Lost*. Milton's post-lapsarian pair, as they gaze eastwards, find themselves expelled from Paradise and about to embark upon the trials and tribulations of mortal existence on a "subjected plain".<sup>24</sup> In contrast to *Paradise Lost*, Wordsworth's 'hope-forsaken pair' have already survived their physical and spiritual trials on the plain and this, perhaps, suggests a reversal of Milton's scenario in which the traveller and wanderer are restored to, rather than exiled from, paradise. That the couples in Milton's epic and Wordsworth's romance gaze eastward to the rising sun and not westward (traditionally associated with death) might be cause for cautious optimism.

At first, this optimism seems justified if we read *Salisbury Plain* alongside a passage from the first *Essay upon Epitaphs*, where Wordsworth compares the progression of life from birth to death:

As, in sailing upon the orb of this Planet, a voyage, towards the regions where the sun sets, conducts gradually to the quarter where we have been accustomed to behold it come forth at its rising; and, in like manner, a voyage towards the east, the birth-place in our imagination of the morning, leads finally to the quarter where the Sun is last seen when he departs from our eyes; so, the contemplative Soul, travelling in the direction of mortality, advances to the Country of everlasting Life; and, in like manner, may she continue to explore those cheerful tracts, till she is brought back, for her advantage and benefit to the land of transitory things—of sorrow and tears.<sup>25</sup>

Wordsworth's analogy between planetary orbits and the journey of the human soul may equate the westward region with the certainty of a spiritual afterlife but, as de Man observes, underlying this system of tropes is the ghostly figure of prosopopoeia which substitutes a mask or face for the absent and deceased name and voice.<sup>26</sup> In spite of the eschatological hope of Wordsworth's image of the sun's westward wanderings, de Man concludes the sun symbolises nature and knowledge to become "the eye that *reads* the text of the epitaph" (*original emphasis*).<sup>27</sup> In this deconstructive turn, Wordsworth's Apollonian figure of the sun mitigates against its own cause for optimism by both silhouetting a transitory Dionysian world "of sorrow and tears" and foregrounding those processes of figuration and disfiguration, which enable the nameless and voiceless deceased to speak through epitaphs; or the restorative and obliterating language of ghosts.

Unfortunately, similar misgivings inform Wordsworth's insistence, towards the close of the narration of *Salisbury Plain*, that even the "pleasant scene"—viewed from a "hill-summit" which, like Adam and Eve, they must descend (*PL*, XII, 606)—is laced through with a "wreath of vapour" (*Salisbury Plain*, 407) and intervening "melancholy lowing" (*Salisbury Plain*, 412). Wordsworth's traveller and wanderer may have endured the spiritual and physical test of Salisbury plain, but their grief is far from healed, for we learn that he "had withered young in sorrow's deadly blight" and "her soul [was] for ever widowed of delight." (45, 404-5) These funereal epithets are all the more disturbingly apt in light of Wordsworth's allusions to Milton's description of mankind's expulsion from Eden into a world of transience marked by death as a punishment for their transgression.

As the narrator's focus recedes from the bleak outlook of Wordsworth's hapless couple, the closing lines of *Salisbury Plain* offer both a panoptic and damning indictment of the institutions and principles that have been the cause of societal ills and injustice. Echoing Wordsworth's use of epic and romance motif points, the narrator's own tirade against social injustices translates death as a spiritual and existential problem into a social reality by ascribing (couched as a rhetorical question) the "iron scourge" of the law with a "voice that breathes despair, to death's tremendous verge?" (58, 519-20). Wordsworth's *Salisbury Plain* is haunted by shadowy historical and social realities, which reassert themselves in the main narrative as a series of spectral presences.

This troubling fit between Wordsworth's choice of poetic genre and socio-political subject has been interpreted as an implicit criticism of the Godwinian social vision advocated by the narrator, in which those limitations of political idealism are thrown into relief by the inability of the romance form to accommodate harsh social and political realities.<sup>28</sup> This productive tension can also be usefully reconfigured in relation to Wordsworth's treatment of spectral presences. Operating similarly to the shared, but distinct, ghostly tales of Wordsworth's traveller and wanderer, the dual modes of romance and social critique present in *Salisbury Plain* resonate (as spectral doubles) with one so that romance's tragic disclosure of our existential condition can be translated into the suffering of the masses at the hands of an oppressively unjust society. Even the most hallucinatory and ghostly episodes of the traveller's "unhoused" and alienated state, in *Salisbury Plain*, can be allegorised, as the poem's Spenserian form invites, in terms of the government's unpopular oppressive policies on the home-front and its foreign policy's commitment to a war with France.<sup>29</sup>

Even if it is at the risk of the destruction of those who are oppressed, *Salisbury Plain*'s final two lines serve as a clarion call for revolutionary action, which will ensure that "not a trace / Be left on earth of Superstition's reign, / Save that eternal pile which frowns on Sarum's plain" (61, 549-50). Wordsworth's phrasing, inextricably, implicates those earlier spectral and hallucinatory experiences (born, in part, from superstitious rumours) of the traveller with the political and social tyranny of "Superstition's reign" alluded to here. Wordsworth's imaginative endeavour to bind together the world of romance with political protest ends without resolution or consolation. Wordsworth's Stonehenge belongs as much to the realm of druidic enchantment and romance as it represents the social and political complacency that permitted Sarum to become a rotten borough without political representation.<sup>30</sup> We are left with a landscape dominated by the "eternal pile" of Stonehenge which is itself both a ruin and, by its association with superstition, at some level, ruinous.

Ruined and ruinous forms emblemise the incomplete poetic structure of *Salisbury Plain*; its broken narrative frames, and ghostly tales told of ruins, simultaneously, constitute and resist Wordsworth's attempts to cast and recast the *Salisbury Plain* material as, essentially, a political meditation on the causation of suffering. That the 1842 version, "Guilt and Sorrow", concludes with the very different broken form of the Sailor turned murderer on a gibbet, signals how integral to the *Salisbury Plain* poems are Wordsworth's social concerns about the corruption of society's institutions and how they instigate the perpetration of crime. As in the original conception of *Salisbury Plain*, the revised narrator's perspective on suffering still shows traces of Wordsworth's earlier overly didactic, distant, and objective pronouncement on society

and its ills. This detached outward looking gaze of Wordsworth's narrator of "Guilt and Sorrow" is much in evidence as the reader is invited "when into storm the evening sky is wrought, / Upon his [the Sailor's] swinging corse an eye [to] glance, / And drop, as he once dropped, in a miserable trance."<sup>31</sup> (665-6) Admittedly, there is some invitation to empathy with the "miserable" plight of Wordsworth's Sailor, but the glancing "eye" is drawn to the externalities of the "swinging corse". The Sailor's body devoid of subjectivity is caught in a "miserable trance"; a symbol and reality of the deathly haunted and haunting spectre he has always been and is always becoming.

Those spectres of Wordsworth's hung murderer or lost traveller and female vagrant remain as persistent, though banished, presences whether as the victims of social injustice or the residue of the ghostly stories that belong to the realm of "Superstition's reign". Paradoxically, the "ghostly language" of Wordsworth's *Salisbury Plain* both restores and obliterates the original moment of haunting to ensure those future occurrences of haunting. As a consequence Wordsworth's damning pronouncement on "Superstition's reign" (and its associated corrupt social institutions) as anachronistic, inadvertently runs the risk of legitimising the antiquated systems that he despised. Wordsworth's spectral presences of superstition and social corruption are never truly vanquished: their ghosts and spectres return to haunt any new political, social, or religious order; gesturing back towards the arcane systems that originally legitimated their own ghostly presences.<sup>32</sup> Romanticism is one such new order that constitutes its own "ghostly memory of mourned absences" and the haunted presence of its own future absence. These Romantic spectres are the allusive and elusive "ghost of sound" within Romanticism itself and heard in those subtle, yet

perceptible, Romantic echoes forever present in the theory and practice of post-Romanticism.

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<sup>1</sup> William Wordsworth, 'The Same' (on the subject of the previous sonnet in "Ecclesiastical Sonnets", titled "Inside King's College Chapel, Cambridge"), *Sonnets of William Wordsworth. Collected in One Volume* (London: Moxon, 1838), 437.

<sup>2</sup> Marc Redfield, "Spectral Romanticisms", *European Romantic Review* 9:2 (1998): 271-3.

<sup>3</sup> Paul de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia UP, 1984), 259. Hereafter *RR*.

<sup>4</sup> For an account of the spectres that haunt De Manian deconstruction see Tilottama Rajan, "Displacing Post-Structuralism: Romantic Studies after Paul de Man", *Studies in Romanticism* 24 (1985): 451-74.

<sup>5</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits*. 1986. Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy Ser. Trans. R.J. Hollingdale and intro. Richard Schacht (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996), 274.

<sup>6</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Force and Signification", *Writing and Difference*. 1978. Trans and intro Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 1995), 5.

<sup>7</sup> Wallace Stevens, "The Idea of Order at Key West", *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poems*. 1984. (London: Faber, 2008), 111.

<sup>8</sup> John Keats, "Ode to a Nightingale", *Poems of John Keats*. Ed. Jack Stillinger 1978. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1979), 69, 371.

<sup>9</sup> Geoffrey H. Hartman, *The Unremarkable Wordsworth*. Fore. Donald G. Marshall. The Theory and History of Literature Ser. 34. (Minneapolis: Minnesota (1987), 133.

<sup>10</sup> David Simpson, *Wordsworth, Commodification and Social Concern: The Poetics of Modernity*. Cambridge Studies in Romanticism Ser. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009), 143-73.

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<sup>11</sup> Mary Jacobus, *Romantic Things: A Tree, a Rock, a Cloud* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 2012), 3.

Jacobus's sense of Wordsworth's death-orientated poetics speaks to similar concerns in two other recent studies. See Kurt Fosso, *Buried Communities: Wordsworth and the Bonds of Mourning* (Albany, New York: SUNY, 2004). Hereafter *BCW*. See also Paul H. Fry, *Wordsworth and the Poetry of What We Are* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2008).

<sup>12</sup> For a full account of Wordsworth's revisions of this work and its publication history see Enid Welsford, *Salisbury Plain: A Study in the Development of Wordsworth's Mind and Art* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1966).

<sup>13</sup> Heidi Thomson notes that Wordsworth's central character, in "Adventures on Salisbury Plain" embodies an extreme "consciousness of loss" so that, figuratively speaking, 'He dies before he dies' (9). See Thomson, "A Perfect Storm: The Nature of Consciousness on Salisbury Plain", *Grasmere 2013* (Penrith: Humanities E-books, 2013): 8-27. Hereafter *APS*.

<sup>14</sup> Wordsworth's phrase taken from *The Prelude* (1805), II, l. 327. See William Wordsworth, *William Wordsworth: The Major Works*. 1984 Ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford, 2000), 400. All subsequent quotations from this edition.

<sup>15</sup> See Tilottama Rajan, *Dark Interpreter: The Discourse of Romanticism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1980).

<sup>16</sup> Stuart Curran, *Poetic Form and British Romanticism* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1986), 132.

<sup>17</sup> For a useful discussion of the paradoxical nature of the 'politics of romance' in relation to Wordsworth see David Duff, *Romance and Revolution: Shelley and the Politics of a Genre*. Cambridge Studies in Romanticism 7. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 2, 44-53.

<sup>18</sup> See my account of these figures in "Wordsworth and the Circulation of Grief", *Essays in Criticism* 62 (2012): 250-2; 248-63. For an alternative (new-)historicist reading in which "Wordsworth allows the Discharged Soldier to speak for himself" (52). See Chris Murray, "Discharged Soldier: Wordsworth, Cobbett, and Military Corruption in the 1790s", *Essays in Romanticism* 1 (2014): 35-52.

<sup>19</sup> Compare with Heidi Thomson's sense that in later versions of the poem these differing viewpoints "complement and mirror each other, their absent spouses are ghosts of remembrance in their interaction with each other." (*APS*, 17-18).

<sup>20</sup> Heidi Thomson identifies this as the "perfect storm" of possible religious redemption through the words of the Presbyterian preacher, Hubert Stogdon. See *APS*, 9.

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- <sup>21</sup> Sunil Karmer Sarker dates this poem as early as 1786. See Sunil Karmer Sarker, *Wordsworth Companion*. Vol 2. (New Delhi: Atlantic, 2003), 30.
- <sup>22</sup> Kurt Fosso identifies Wordsworth's traveller and female vagrant with the Red Cross Knight and Una from book one of Spenser's *The Faerie Queen* to suggest that they move from a state of 'unaccommodated isolation' to 'what Anne Janowitz calls "moments of community."' See *BCW*, 82.
- <sup>23</sup> For more on Romanticism and this dynamic see my *Romanticism, Memory, and Mourning* (Farnham; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013), 115-30.
- <sup>24</sup> John Milton, *The Portable Milton*, ed. Douglas Bush. (Harmondsworth: Viking-Penguin, 1977), XII, 640, 547. All quotations from this edition.
- <sup>25</sup> William Wordsworth, *The Excursion*, ed. Sally Bushell, James A. Butler, and Michael C. Jaye (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 2007), 305-6.
- <sup>26</sup> See David Simpson notes de Man's comment that in the moment that through "prosopopoeia... one begins to perceive a world of potential ghosts". Quoted in *WSC*, 162.
- <sup>27</sup> See *RR*, 75, 75-6.
- <sup>28</sup> Kurt Fosso notes this generic discrepancy as a caution about Godwinian societal reforms in *Salisbury Plain*. See *BCW*, 85; 84.
- <sup>29</sup> Mary Jacobus identifies continuities between the hallucinatory elements of Wordsworth's narrative and the poem's political protest. See Mary Jacobus, *Tradition and Experiment in Wordsworth's Lyrical Ballads (1798)*. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1976), 151-2.
- <sup>30</sup> For accounts of the political status of Sarum as a rotten borough see *BCW*, 85. See also Michael Wiley, *Romantic Geography; Wordsworth and Anglo-European Spaces* (New York: St. Martin's, 1998), 32 and Anne Janowitz, *England's Ruins: Poetic Purpose and the National Landscape*. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 104.
- <sup>31</sup> William Wordsworth, "Guilt and Sorrow", *The Complete Poetical Works of Wordsworth: Authorised Edition* (London: Moxon, 1869), 23; 74, 665-6.
- <sup>32</sup> For an illuminating account of "the return of the ghost" (177) in Freud, Heidegger, and Derrida see David Meager, "The Uncanniness of Spectrality", *Mosaic* 44 (2011): 177-93.