

**”IF MINE HAD BEEN THE PAINTER’S HAND”:
WHEN WORDSWORTH AND KEATS
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**“IF MINE HAD BEEN THE PAINTER’S HAND”:
WHEN WORDSWORTH AND KEATS RE/UN-WRITE PAINTINGS**

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“You speak of Lord Byron and me—There is this great difference between us. He describes what he sees—I describe what I imagine—Mine is the hardest task. You see the immense difference—” (John Keats’ letter to the George Keatses, 20 September 1819, Rollins, II, 200)

This excerpt from one of Keats’ letters to his brother and sister-in-law underlines the fact that, for the Romantics, no study of images can be dissociated from references to theories of the imagination. Wordsworth and Keats, whose poetry will be addressed in this essay, both believed in the transcendent power of creative imagination, and both reflected at length on the processes of poetic creation. The issue of representation, be it visual or verbal, is central for these poets, and has to be considered as one function of the imagination, the reproductive faculty, related to but distinct from the more valued creative faculty. Keats’ letter indeed introduces a clear sense of hierarchy: imagination for him (though perhaps not so radically for Wordsworth) differs from mere representation or description, the sense of sight being opposed to another, higher form of consciousness. In another famous letter, Keats compares the faculty of imagination to Adam’s dream, thus also stressing its spiritual power.¹

Moreover, both poets were friends with painters and were interested in painters’ theories about art. One of Keats’ most famous remarks about the intensity of art was inspired by his reaction to Benjamin West’s *Death on the Pale Horse*,² and, in one of his letters from Scotland, he acknowledges the painter’s superiority when it comes to rendering the beauty of a landscape. For these poets, the relationships among reality, perception and representation were essential, especially when art needs to confront the issues of death and loss, all the more so since theories of the Sublime were still current at the time.

¹ “The Imagination may be compared to Adam’s dream—he awoke and found it truth.” (To Benjamin Bailey, 22 November 1817, Rollins, I, 185). Keats’ spelling and use of punctuation have been respected in all the quotations.

² “I spent Friday evening with Wells & went the next morning to see Death on the Pale horse. It is a wonderful picture, when West’s age is considered; But there is nothing to be intense upon; no women one feels mad to kiss; no face swelling into reality. the excellence of every Art is its intensity, capable of making all disagreeables evaporate, from their being in close relationship with Beauty & Truth—Examine King Lear & you will find this exemplified throughout; but in this picture we have unpleasantness without any momentous depth of speculation excited, in which to bury its repulsiveness—” (To George and Tom Keats, 21 December 1817, Rollins, I, 192).

This essay focuses on two poems in which a speaker is inspired by paintings and confronts them with his own response to reality, at a time when Wordsworth was mourning the death of his brother John at sea, and when Keats was grappling with the matter of including his awareness of human suffering into his poetry, which until then had been mostly escapist. Wordsworth lost his brother in 1805 and subsequently wrote two elegies in his remembrance. The one which will be discussed here is inspired by Sir George Beaumont's *Picture of Peele Castle in a Storm* (Fig. 2). The speaker, clearly presented as a poet, first explains that in happier times he would not have painted the same picture as Beaumont, which is clearly not "poetic" enough for him, before arguing that now that he has been "humanized" by his loss, he finds the painting perfectly adapted to his own state of mind.

Several years later, Keats writes an epistle to his sick friend John Hamilton Reynolds and, like a good doctor, tries to conjure up pleasant visions to entertain his friend and help him recover. One of these images is Claude Le Lorrain's *The Enchanted Castle*, (Fig. 1) which the poet evokes at length, imagining what he cannot actually see in the painting as he proceeds. The second half of the poem then turns to the poet's anguished awareness of the limits of his own creative powers, and to his doubts about the value of any such beautiful images when confronted with death and destruction.

Both poems explicitly refer to a painting and ponder whether the visual image offered by the picture corresponds to the poet's perception. But they also introduce the poet's own creative imagery, related to the painting and interacting with it, as it were, offering us a poet's views on a visual form of representation as well as an instance of verbal representation.

Both poets raise the issue of the status of images in poetry, considering them both a source of inspiration and a form of expression, a means of reaching knowledge even, as in myth-making. I propose to begin with a presentation of the treatment of the visual image in each poem, before turning to the manner in which each interacts with the poem.

First a few words about the two texts: although Keats' epistle, directly addressed to his friend, is more private and personal than Wordsworth's elegy, the latter is also highly referential, and actually opens with a direct address to one of the objects depicted in the painting, the castle itself. "I was thy neighbour once, thou rugged Pile!" (1) The metaphorical opening shows how laden with figurative meaning the reference to the castle will be throughout the poem. This past experience shapes the first half of the elegy, devoted to Wordsworth's memory of what he felt to be a happy time, and the first eight stanzas state that had he then painted the scene, it would have differed significantly from Beaumont's painting because he would have added "the gleam, / The light that never was, on sea or land, / The consecration, and the Poet's dream;" (14–16). However, the tone changes with stanza 9, which marks

a turning point in terms which strongly echo lines already written by the poet in "Ode: Intimations of Immortality:"³ "So once it would have been—'tis now no more;" (33), and the second part of the poem concentrates on the actual painting by Beaumont, which the poet-speaker now finds perfectly adapted to his present perception of the castle by the sea. Thus Wordsworth's poem is structured on the opposition between a happy past, the subject for a would-be poem now dismissed as illusion, and a present saddened by loss and mourning, which is accurately represented by Beaumont's painting. Characteristically, the elegy ends with an ambiguous vision of the future, which attempts to instill some hope, although its negative overtones—as well as the sad connotation of the last word—leave the reader with a melancholy feeling: "Not without hope we suffer and we mourn." (60)

Images abound in this elegy, which weaves together the threads of a vision made up of Wordsworth's memories, the picture his imagination would have created at the time, his present perception of the actual castle, and his present vision of Beaumont's painting. Significantly, the castle itself, which becomes transformed into a symbol of strength and resistance in the course of the poem, is referred to as an Image as early as the second stanza, as though the poet's perception of it were strongly associated with representation from the start: "Whene'er I looked, thy Image still was there;" (7). This obviously also connotes some sense of spirituality, the Image reminding the reader of a religious icon, there to be praised and revered. The actual castle is turned into a symbol even before being painted by Beaumont.

Keats' "Epistle to Reynolds" is not built as carefully as Wordsworth's poem, first because the genre entails a different form of structure, but also because the epistle opens with the speaker evoking those images that come to our minds before falling asleep; he tries to recapture the sensation of random association that then prevails. In the second stanza these fanciful images ("Old Socrates a tying his cravat; / And Hazlitt playing with Miss Edgeworth's cat; / And Junius Brutus pretty well so so, / Making the best of 's way towards Soho." (9–12)) give way to visions clearly inspired by pictorial art, as the phrase "Titian colours" makes clear. This leads Keats to mention Claude Le Lorrain's *The Enchanted Castle*, and to describe the painting for his friend, or rather to use the painting as a starting point for more fanciful evocations. Thus he imagines the past history of the castle, and, as Ian Jack⁴ has pointed out, the "golden galley all in silken trim" is hard to reconcile with the actual little boat one

³ "The things which I have seen I now can see no more." William Wordsworth, "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood", 9.

⁴ See Jack, *Keats and the Mirror of Art*, 127- 130, for a full discussion of the epistle and of its relationship with the painting.

can make out on the original. Keats considers the painting as the visible part of a larger unseen picture and describes what he cannot see, exactly as in the quotation I began with, using his mind's eye more than his eye-sight.

After completing this evocation with the addition of music, the speaker shifts to a darker mood: "O that our dreamings all of sleep or wake / Would all their colours from the sunset take: / From something of material sublime, / Rather than shadow our own soul's daytime/In the dark void of night." (67–71) As in Wordsworth's "Elegiac Stanzas," light and color then give way to darkness. This change of tone is what has led the epistle to be remembered as Keats' first major poem integrating suffering: the last part of the poem is devoted to the poet's anguished vision of "an eternal fierce destruction" which "spoils the singing of the nightingale" and which prevents him from enjoying the images he referred to earlier. This second part does not directly refer to *The Enchanted Castle*, although it still evokes the sea, thus showing how Keats' train of thought has proceeded.

As in Wordsworth's poem, the epistle stages a castle surrounded by the sea, and here too the painting is summoned as a source of pleasant impressions before being dismissed as unable to answer the poet's needs. In Wordsworth's poem, the movement is from dismissal to acceptance, but the poem also expresses the implicit idea that the picture is now acceptable because the poet has given up believing in the existence of a "visionary gleam," to quote the "Intimations of Immortality" ode. Now that the poet is mourning his brother, he finds the painting suits his own perceptions because he no longer trusts in a transcendent power; likewise, Keats finally finds *The Enchanted Castle* inadequate because it fails to address the issue that preoccupies him, the issue of destruction. In both poems, the image offered by the painter is implicitly compared with the poet's vision and read as one possible interpretation of reality. Each poem thus addresses perception and representation, as set in time. Keats explicitly refers to the imagination, and to the development of his own creative powers, which he finds confined, where Wordsworth, as so often in his poetry, is more intent on mourning the loss of his earlier visionary powers, here reactivated by his brother's death. Thus, one poem turns toward the past, while the other hopes for some future evolution. But whether lost or still to come, the existence of imaginative, creative powers is not doubted by either poet.

Moreover, each poem offers its own images, verbal this time, of a castle by the sea. We have seen how Le Lorrain's painting triggers Keats' imagination: when he first refers to it, the poet accumulates words and images, in an attempt to match the painting with language, as in this line, which can hardly be said to be an accurate description of the actual painting: "... it doth seem / A mossy place, a Merlin's hall, a dream." (33–34) The gradation is clear, and language here enables the artist

to express the progression from visual description to imagination. Keats' entire epistle proceeds in the same way, moving from not very accurate description to extravagant suppositions betraying the poet's delight in his own creative faculties. Likewise, Wordsworth's poem starts by creating its own image of the castle, personified from the beginning ("rugged Pile," later "hoary Pile"), before turning it into a symbol of eternal peace ("Thy Form was sleeping on a glassy sea"(4), "A Picture had it been of lasting ease" (25)) which will be compared with Beaumont's picture. He too gives his imagination full license when dreaming of the poem that never was: "Thou shouldst have seemed a treasure-house divine / Of peaceful years; a chronicle of heaven" (21–22), the castle being transmuted into literary abstraction by the metaphors chosen.

Thus, both poets transform their reading of the painting into a verbal creation, in which the speaker identifies with part of his chosen painting, this process creating yet another image; Wordsworth clearly identifies with the weather-beaten castle resisting the assaults of the furious sea, because of "the look with which it braves (...) The lightning, the fierce wind, and trampling waves" (50–52), and this leads him to conclude his elegy by praising "fortitude," a feeling he no doubt wishes on himself as much as on the castle. Keats, on the other hand, speaks of himself as though he were a ship on the sea, ("my flag is not unfurl'd / On the admiral staff" (73–74)), and, characteristically, the image he chooses includes its own potential development. This variation obviously reflects the fact that Keats was a young poet, where Wordsworth had already matured, but it also marks a significant difference in each poet's mode of expression: Keats always favors dynamic, organic imagery, which contains the germs of its own growth, and which represents halted movement, always liable to resume. Wordsworth, in contrast, likes to focus on his recollections, and to transform an object he has contemplated into a symbol he can then analyze. Thus, where Keats uses images in which—to quote another of his letters, this time to Shelley—he "loads every rift of [his] subject with ore" (16 August 1820, II, 323), Wordsworth aims for a symbolic dimension, even if this entails less richness for the image itself.

Thus, each poem includes the painting and discusses it, but also endeavors to enlarge upon the vision shown by the painting, as though trying to supersede the material frame of the canvas.

In his evocation of *The Enchanted Castle*, Keats quickly adds sound. The poet who had referred to imagination as an "old melody—in a delicious place—by a delicious voice"⁵ cannot conceive of a soundless vision, and he imagines some "sweet music" bringing life to Le Lorrain's painting.

⁵ "have you never by being surprised with an old Melody—in a delicious place—by a delicious voice, fe[el]t over again your very speculations and surmises at the time it first operated on your soul—do you not remember forming to yourself <sic> the singer's face more beautiful than <sic> it was possible and yet with the elevation of the Moment you did not think so—even then you were mounted on the Wings of Imagination so high—that the Prototype must be here after—that delicious face you will see—" (To Benjamin Bailey, 22 November 1817, Rollins, I, 185).

This power of sound is of course one of the characteristics of verse, and Keats makes full use of it when attempting to describe his own vision of the sea: “The wide sea did weave / An untumultuous fringe of silver foam / Along the flat brown sand.” (91–93) Alliterations and rhythm are fused to add power to the metaphor and to remind the reader that poetic words have to be heard. Although he makes no such direct reference to music, Wordsworth does mention silence when talking of his own vision (“silent Nature’s breathing life”(28), where movement is suggested by the word “breathe”), and his verse illustrates the same principle: the rhythm and meter of the central lines have been devised for effect: the iambic “A power is gone, which nothing can restore;” (35) conveying the inevitability of what has occurred, while the trochee in the next line stresses the pain of the speaker’s fate: “A deep distress hath humanized my Soul” (36). The two poems thus remind us that the romantic age is a time of change, where seeing becomes considered inferior to feeling, partly because the viewer is then too detached from nature to experience fusion with it.

Moreover, in both poems, the image offered by the painting is set within a temporal framework, which in turn creates movement. Although the two poets did not share the same perception of time, Wordsworth always looking back in nostalgia where Keats was both anticipating and fearing the future, they did share the idea that art should transcend time, while including temporality and reflecting the movements of life.

As has already been pointed out, Wordsworth’s poem strongly echoes his earlier “Intimations of Immortality Ode”, a poem which laments the loss of his visionary powers:

There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,
 The earth, and every common sight,
 To me did seem
 Apparelled in celestial light,
 The glory and the freshness of a dream.
 It is not now as it hath been of yore; -
 Turn wheresoe’er I may,
 By night or day,
 The things which I have seen I now can see no more. (1–9)

In Wordsworth’s elegy, Beaumont’s picture of Peele Castle is set in time, the poet’s own personal time, and the picture is made to coincide with the present moment, while no longer corresponding with former perceptions. Wordsworth’s technique in the poem leads from eternal bliss to a painful awareness of time as loss and want: his first perceptions of the castle are made to look eternal, thanks to figures

of speech such as repetition, the absence of a verb, and thanks to the rhythm and meter, as in these two lines: "So pure the sky, so quiet was the air! / So like, so very like, was day to day!" (5–6). The present tense is used to describe the painting: "That Hulk which labours in the deadly swell, / This rueful sky, this pageantry of fear." (47–48) The move from "that" to "this," as well as the connotations of words such as "swell," "pageantry," create a feeling of movement and thus of process, although the present tense also tries to convey a more lasting vision. The original castle by the sea is given a past by the poem as a whole, but, strikingly, this past excludes Beaumont's picture, while concentrating on the speaker's memories. The only image of eternity is provided by the poet's vision in the first part of the poem, and the painting is here to symbolize the loss of this vision.

The process is different in Keats' poem: we have seen that, as he remembers the painting, he imagines a past for the castle, and creates a story to describe this past. He sets Le Lorrain's idealized, mythological picture within a temporal framework that is both fanciful and yet related to history as process. Rather than be content with one painting, the one he is remembering, he offers several other images, thus enriching the existing picture with his own dreams:

The doors all look as if they oped themselves,
 The windows as if latch'd by fays and elves –
 And from them comes a silver flash of light
 As from the westward of a summer's night;
 Or like a beauteous woman's large blue eyes
 Gone mad through olden songs and poesies. (49–54)

Keats here conforms to Hazlitt's definition of poetry in "On Poetry in General," by enlarging upon the painting: "Painting gives the object itself; poetry what it implies, Painting embodies what a thing contains in itself; poetry suggests what exists out of it, in any manner connected with it." (10) The poet introduces movement within a painting that is peacefully static—whereas Beaumont's painting is movement, the centuries between the two paintings showing their mark. However, in the last part of the poem, what Keats wishes to express when faced with the infinity of the sea is "a mysterious tale." In other words, the images that people his mind have to be narratives, not only timeless pictures.

Thus, each poem questions the relationship of the picture with time and with permanence as well.⁶ The picture's very permanence irks Keats after having attracted him to it, as will happen again

⁶ See what Claude Mettra writes about the myth of Gaia as universal creator: « Ici s'exprime la dramaturgie profonde de l'acte créateur qui est à la fois soumis au temps et désireux de lui échapper, de fixer l'éternel au cœur même de ce qui est englué dans l'histoire. » (Mettra, 21).

in “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” where the urn’s persistent silence, after being praised at the beginning of the ode, proves disappointing to the speaker, and leads to his disillusion with art. As for Wordsworth, the strong relationship between the painting and time justifies his appreciation of it, because he no longer has faith in eternity. In the “Elegiac Stanzas,” the painting has an ambiguous status: its material presence compensates the feeling of loss, and leads to the poem’s bitter-sweet closing stanza, while at the same time this very materiality underlines the lack of spiritual transcendence. Likewise, Keats regrets the fact that the beautiful images triggered by Le Lorrain’s painting should act as a screen hiding the still-unrevealed truth of life.

Thus the main difference between the images offered by the poems and the paintings can be summed up by Keats’s lines: “I saw / Too far into the sea” (93–94), which ironically stress the limitations of the sense of sight, thanks to the homophonic “sea” and to the effect of the run-on line. This use of the verb echoes another poem by Wordsworth, “Tintern Abbey”—which Keats had lately been re-reading—in which Wordsworth mentions the state of consciousness during which, “the burden of the mystery” being lightened, “with an eye made quiet by the power / Of harmony, and the deep power of joy, / We see into the life of things” (Wordsworth, “Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey,” 47–49). Indeed, this is what both poets claim for art: not to see, but to see into, in other words to prefer vision to sight, the sense of sight being too restricted. Such vision is precisely what Wordsworth praises in the first half of his elegy, when he refers to the “Light that never was” (15).

The two paintings are paradoxically considered limited because they show what is visible. Indeed, by imagining a past, by adding music, by fantasizing about the painting, Keats is enlarging upon what can be seen on the canvas: the turning point in his poem comes when he admits that he cannot be satisfied with looking at the surface of what is being shown. The word “image” takes on a different meaning; instead of referring to mimetic representation, it becomes the creative foreshadowing of a higher truth, “a Shadow of reality to come,” as Keats put it in his imagination letter to Bailey; the poetic images created by the two poets are instruments of revelation ... or they would be, if the poets could invent them, that is. Indeed, Wordsworth’s elegy depicts these poetic images in the conditional tense, the tense used by his friend Coleridge to create the striking “caves of ice” of “Kubla Khan,” in which the images are used to suggest a connection between the mimetic representation of reality and another form of consciousness, invisible. By interpreting Le Lorrain’s painting, Keats is trying to make the connection explicit; the last part of his epistle however acknowledges his own incapacity to write out this unrevealed truth, a doubt that characterizes his art until the end of his creative life.

Although the two poems apparently differ in their assessment of the comparative status of poetry and painting, they agree as to what they consider to be the purpose of a work of art: it should reflect the reality of perception and offer an insight into truth, as Wordsworth puts it, still in the conditional, "Such Picture would I at that time have made: / And seen the soul of truth in every part, / A steadfast peace that might not be betrayed." (30–32) This vision of permanence which enlightens the viewer is what should be aimed for, what the paintings referred to in the poems only do partially, hence the disillusion at the end of Keats' epistle, and the lukewarm optimism of Wordsworth's last line.

However, the paintings also play a more essential part in each poem. Their subject is the sea, the immensity of the sea, which connotes death for the two poets: the actual death of Wordsworth's brother John, and imagined death for Keats, who, soon after writing this epistle, considered going on board an Indiaman as a doctor, in order to make a living, and who was fully aware of the dangers of the sea, since his brother George was about to leave for America. As is so often the case in British literature, the sea holds a symbolic, mythical meaning here; Keats had written to the same Reynolds a few months earlier that he was haunted by Shakespeare's lines in *King Lear*, addressed by Edgar to blinded Gloucester, lines which he misquotes as "Do you not hear the Sea, Jack?"⁷ One of Keats' greatest sonnets, "When I have fears that I may cease to be" ends with a vision of the poet standing alone "on the shore of the wide world, / Till love and fame to nothingness do sink." (13-14) The sea clearly represents the immensity of the unknown and the darkness of human life.

Both poems thus choose to focus on paintings just as they are trying to come to terms with the representation of destruction and darkness. How to create meaning out of meaninglessness, in other words, or how to devise a form where shape there is none. Wordsworth appears to decide that there is no such meaning, that the only salvation lies in being faithful to one's perceptions and emotions. To resist and be able to withstand adversity is the motto he remembers from Beaumont's painting.

As for Keats, he voices his doubts clearly in the last part of the poem: can he find the words to tell this mysterious tale of destruction? Can he transform this vision of darkness into art, and thereby bring it to light and make it meaningful? The "Epistle to Reynolds" will be echoed by "Ode on a Grecian Urn" one year later, because the ode, too, uses a visual work of art as its subject, a work which the speaker questions, and which fails to provide satisfactory answers. The epistle also foreshadows Keats's other great odes, including "Ode to Psyche," since Le Lorrain's painting, although known as *The Enchanted Castle*, had another, better known title, *Landscape with Psyche and the Palace of Amor*,

⁷ The original reads: "Hark, do you hear the sea?"

a mythological episode that Keats uses in his later ode.⁸ Choosing another form of art provides some distance for the poet, who can thus address what preoccupies him more easily. But the art of painting is precisely devoted to the depiction of visual scenes, and thus to the task of making a vision visible on canvas. In the world of storms and death lamented by Wordsworth, the speaker fears that nothing is left unseen, the painting faithfully duplicates reality, and we cannot hope for a hidden meaning. That is why in stanza 5 I believe the deictic “this” to refer both to the painting and to the real world, both being fused by the poet’s consciousness. (“I would have planted thee, thou hoary Pile / Amid a world how different from this!” (17–18))

In the same world, experienced by Keats some 20 years later, Keats, who had read and studied Wordsworth and viewed the elder poet as a guide, the speaker is afraid he cannot transmute eternal destruction into art. What is needed to do so is an image conveying the poet’s vision, but Keats also mentions a “mysterious tale” that he cannot utter. In this respect the epistle foreshadows Keats’ two epic attempts at relating this mysterious tale of destruction, *Hyperion* and *The Fall of Hyperion*, both based on myth, both unfinished. He believes this failure is due to the present state of his imagination, strikingly described as “... brought / Beyond its proper bound, yet still confined,– / Lost in a sort of purgatory blind” (78–80), an image which again includes potential development, as in a process of initiation.

In the two poems, the painting serves as a go-between, between reality and the poet’s dream, a necessary passage for the poet to question his art and his own creative act. Because it is visual and framed, the artifact offers its presence to contain the poet’s sense of loss. This presence is in itself a limitation, but it also provides some form of consolation, of comfort that Wordsworth acknowledges at the end of his elegy.

But the painting is also a metaphor for creation, because it represents another creator’s vision, confronted with the speaker’s perception of reality in the poem; as a creative act, the painting represents both a double of the poem, a sister art expressing itself, and otherness, since the medium used differs, and so does the vision. The association of the painting with the poem also enacts the process of myth-making, if one agrees with Wunenburger’s conception of myths as living images.⁹ The myth needs images, living images at that, to survive and to fulfill its explanatory function, although it works as a

⁸ See Jack, 128.

⁹ « Pour suivre la gestation des formes, la science doit s’effacer devant une poétique, c’est-à-dire un récit mythique où le vrai se dit par images. » (Wunenburger, « Le Mythe de l’œuvre », 10). « Le mythe fait vivre des images organisées en récits. » (Wunenburger, *La Vie des images*, 33).

narrative. It coalesces time and space, and this is what both these poems also attempt to do. These are not actual myths, of course, but I believe that each poem does attempt to provide answers, thanks to images, that could respond to man's existential questions. In this respect, the painting plays a decisive part, because it triggers the poet's urge to write the tale, and also because it provides the necessary images that can first be deconstructed and then recreated by the poet.

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LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

- BEAUMONT, Sir George. *Picture of Peele Castle in a Storm*, 1805. Dove Cottage and the Wordsworth Museum, Grasmere.
- GELLEE, Claude Le Lorrain. *The Enchanted Castle*. 1664. National Gallery, London.

APPENDIX



Fig. 1. Claude Gellée, Le Lorrain, *The Enchanted Castle*, 1664. © The National Gallery, London



Fig. 2. Sir George Beaumont, *Picture of Peele Castle in a Storm*, 1805. © Dove Cottage, The Wordsworth Trust, Grasmere.