

1806

Elegiac Stanzas

William Wordsworth

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*ELEGIAC STANZAS,*¹

Suggested by a Picture of PEELE CASTLE, in a Storm,

Painted

BY SIR GEORGE BEAUMONT.²

I was thy Neighbour once, thou rugged Pile!³
Four summer weeks I dwelt in sight of thee:
I saw thee every day; and all the while
Thy Form was sleeping on a glassy sea.

¹ Composed 1806.

² Sir George Beaumont (1753-1827) was an amateur painter, a member of the Royal Academy, one of the founders of the British Museum, and a friend and patron of WW. He painted "Piel Castle in a Storm" in 1806 as a response to the death of WW's brother John, who drowned with 245 others in a night storm when the vessel he captained sank off the coast of England in February 1805. See Introduction, p. 000, and Appendix D.

³ WW spent a summer month in 1794 in the vicinity of Piel Island, upon which the ruins of Piel Castle stand. Piel Island is a promontory one kilometer off the coast of Furness, Cumbria, in the Irish Sea.

So pure the sky, so quiet was the air! 5
So like, so very like, was day to day!
Whene'er I look'd, thy Image still was there;
It trembled, but it never pass'd away.

How perfect was the calm! it seem'd no sleep;
No mood, which season takes away, or brings: 10
I could have fancied that the mighty Deep
Was even the gentlest of all gentle Things.

Ah! THEN, if mine had been the Painter's hand,
To express what then I saw; and add the gleam,
The light that never was, on sea or land, 15
The consecration, and the Poet's dream;

I would have planted thee, thou hoary Pile!
Amid a world how different from this!
Beside a sea that could not cease to smile;
On tranquil land, beneath a sky of bliss: 20

Thou shouldst have seem'd a treasure-house, a mine
Of peaceful years; a chronicle of heaven:—
Of all the sunbeams that did ever shine
The very sweetest had to thee been given.

A Picture had it been of lasting ease, 25
Elysian quiet, without toil or strife;
No motion but the moving tide, a breeze,
Or merely silent Nature's breathing life.

Such, in the fond delusion of my heart,
Such Picture would I at that time have made: 30
And seen the soul of truth in every part;
A faith, a trust, that could not be betray'd.

So once it would have been,—'tis so no more;
I have submitted to a new controul:
A power is gone, which nothing can restore; 35
A deep distress⁴ hath humaniz'd my Soul.

Not for a moment could I now behold
A smiling sea and be what I have been:
The feeling of my loss will ne'er be old;

⁴ The death of John Wordsworth and perhaps the associated circumstances. See Appendix D, p. 000.

This, which I know, I speak with mind serene. 40

Then, Beaumont, Friend! who would have been the Friend,
If he had lived, of Him whom I deplore,⁵
This Work of thine I blame not, but commend;
This sea in anger, and that dismal shore.

Oh 'tis a passionate Work!—yet wise and well; 45
Well chosen is the spirit that is here;
That Hulk⁶ which labours in the deadly swell,
This rueful sky, this pageantry of fear!

And this huge Castle, standing here sublime, 50
I love to see the look with which it braves,
Cased in the unfeeling armour of old time,
The light'ning, the fierce wind, and trampling waves.

Farewell, farewell the Heart that lives alone,
Hous'd in a dream, at distance from the Kind
Such happiness, wherever it be known, 55
Is to be pitied; for 'tis surely blind.

But welcome fortitude, and patient cheer,
And frequent sights of what is to be born!⁷
Such sights, or worse, as are before me here.—
Not without hope we suffer and we mourn[.] 60

⁵ “Him” is John Wordsworth; to deplore is to weep for, bewail, lament; to grieve over, regret deeply.

⁶ The Hulk is the ship in distress in Beaumont’s painting. See Appendix C5, p. 000, for an image of the painting.

⁷ Changed to “borne!” in 1827. JC thinks it was always meant to be “borne” but WW kept “born” in his collected works in 1815.

