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Rhyming and Undeciding in Wordsworth and Norman Nicholson

Abstract:

Wordsworth's poem 'Yarrow Unvisited' suggests that it is better not to go somewhere than to go and risk being disappointed. Responding to this idea in the poem 'Askam Unvisited', the twentieth-century Cumbrian poet Norman Nicholson describes how he had planned to visit the town of Askam in the southern Lake District only to face an agony of indecision before resolving in the end not to go. Both poets look forward to a time when they might be forced to look back with regret, and choose instead to preserve a sense of what might have been. A preoccupation with the passage of time and the consequences of decision-making is connected in these poems to the workings of rhyme, particularly to rhyme's relationship with effects of timing and determinism.

Keywords:

Wordsworth, Nicholson, rhyme, counterfactual, time, decision

Norman Nicholson was not much of a traveller. Throughout his long life (1914-1987), he barely ventured beyond Millom, the small town in South West Cumbria where he was born. Whether he preferred to stay put out of a sense of contentment, fear, or stubbornness, he was always ready to imagine what might be lying beyond the horizon. From Millom he could look across the coast to see the town of Askam, and his subsequent deliberations about whether or not to go and visit the place are the subject of his poem 'Askam Unvisited' (1944). Nicholson borrowed the title and took up the theme from Wordsworth's poem 'Yarrow Unvisited' (1803), in which Wordsworth asserts that it is better to imagine what a place is like than to actually go there. "We have a vision of our own; / "Ah! why should we undo it?", Wordsworth asks, keen to preserve the pleasures of his 'vision' though nonetheless conscious that they are a delusion.¹ If there is a sneaking awareness of self-deception, there is also the salutary impression of being in command of one's illusions. The premise of 'unvisiting' is however an odd one: it makes an occasion out of the conscious decision *not* to go somewhere, and prompts a mixed feeling, where the sense of a place retaining the glow of an ideal is balanced against the suspicion that should one actually 'visit' the place, the result

would be a disappointment.

Such hypothetical deliberations are not the only thing Wordsworth's and Nicholson's poems have in common. Issues of moral agency are also at work, as each poet judges possible actions against the risks or regrets they might entail. If the self-justifications and psychological tricks one plays on oneself depend a good deal on how a potential act is phrased in one's own mind, then the use of rhyme in tracing these mental processes adds a binding layer of complexity: the combination of constraint and freedom in weighing one's words within a given rhyming pattern corresponds to the kind of 'weighing-up' involved in making decisions or allowing circumstances to decide for you. Whether Wordsworth and Nicholson choose to visit their provisional destinations, or whether those places remain unvisited, is worked out in the poems through a rhyme scheme that traces the patterns of thought involved in the shifts and turns of deciding and undecided.

These poems are aware of roads not taken and lives unlived. The preoccupation with the past that characterises both Wordsworth and Nicholson sees them dwelling on things that might have been but never were experienced. While regret would consign those unrealised futures to a life's store of missed opportunities lost to the past, they might equally prove to be a fruitful source of imagination, a way of living a double life of alternative possibilities.² Wordsworth is a poet of revistings, recollection and recompense, as Stephen Gill has shown; Nicholson, writing in the Lake District in the twentieth century, is acutely conscious of the Romantic legacy attached to the place he inhabits, 'a landscape charged with memories', as he puts it.³ He could hardly avoid feeling as he wrote that Wordsworth was peering over his shoulder (Nicholson talks of 'history / Squinting over the rim of the fell' in a poem which alludes to Book IV of *The Prelude*).⁴ Discussing the influence of Wordsworth on Nicholson's response to his local environment, David Cooper writes that 'Nicholson's wrestling with a precursor emerges out of an imaginative engagement with a singularly over-determined landscape'.⁵ Cooper's remark helpfully pushes us to consider literary tradition as a form of poetic over-determinism.

The 'unvisited' places of Wordsworth's and Nicholson's imaginings negotiate such poetic over-determination since their way of imagining a place both

resists and is informed by other writers' view of it. Wordsworth resolutely declares that he 'will not go' (l. 45) in order to preserve the idealized image of Yarrow he had read about in Scottish Border Ballads. Nicholson's unvisiting is less assured on two counts: first, he challenges the romanticized image of the Lake District by selecting as his provisional destination Askam, the less-than-idyllic site of a former ironworks; second, he wavers between wanting to keep hold of an ideal and worrying that he is missing out on the reality, which links to broader, ethical quandaries involved in deciding when or how to act. In these poems, then, the pressing sense of historical determinism coincides with an awareness of the way past choices impinge upon present situations.

Both poems express a concern with deciding and determinism in their choice of form and use of rhyme. Each follows the pre-established pattern of a traditional rhyme-scheme. Within that ordered structure, however, pulses of rhythm and shifts in tense and stress suggest a degree of unsettledness, and admit the possibility of wavering and irresolution. As Peter McDonald notes, the operations of rhyme involve 'a struggle between determinism and the indeterminate':

Rhyme is determined, in so far as a rhyming relation used by the poetic voice is something which *pre*-exists in the available language; at the same time, the exercise of choice in a poet's use of rhyme, and pursuit of the semantic courses which rhyme might offer, is proof of the self's determination, of its exercise of the will in language.⁶

The irony whereby choosing to be confined allows for a greater expression of freedom is the subject of Wordsworth's sonnet about sonnets, 'Nuns fret not', in which willed physical constraint serves as an analogy for the enabling formal constrictions of the sonnet form. In 'Yarrow Unvisited' the physical self-restriction imposed by not going to Yarrow also has a formal equivalent: Wordsworth sticks within the Scottish ballad tradition from which he had derived his image of Yarrow, and, in seeking to maintain that image, he casts his poem into a ballad stanza, directing each eight-line unit round to a refrain that ends with the word 'Yarrow'. His use of the ballad form in earlier works such as 'Goody Blake and Harry

Gill' and 'Simon Lee' had similarly employed eight-line stanzas and patterns of repetition, but here the relative lack of words available in English which rhyme with 'Yarrow' means that each time the pre-penultimate word of the stanza comes round, the necessities of rhyme tighten their hold upon the direction of the verse. 'Yarrow' asserts a pull as the inevitable destination of every stanza, even as the poem is resolutely about *not* going there.

If Wordsworth's refrain serves as a marker of not only the shaping (at once potentially enabling and constraining) influence both of past rhymes and previous literary forms and achievements, it also casts its own proleptic influence: each repetition sets up an anticipation of another yet to come, just as the endlessly deferred visit evokes a Yarrow always yet to be encountered. Nicholson's choice of form is similarly backward-and-forward-looking. Though he had borrowed Wordsworth's title, he may have felt that the ballad form was too twee for Askam, a town in post-industrial decline. The town was founded at the end of the nineteenth century when iron ore was discovered in the area, only to be more or less abandoned in the early 1920s when supplies ran out and the financial depression loomed.⁷ The rest of the poems in Nicholson's *Five Rivers* (1944) collection resist a romanticised view of the Lake District when presenting the industrialized towns that he knew (in poems such as 'Egremont', 'Cleator Moor' and 'Whitehaven'). The kinds of ballads that Wordsworth alludes to in 'Yarrow Unvisited' were perhaps too closely associated with a folkloric or touristic view of the landscape. Instead, Nicholson opted for the Dantean form of *terza rima*, which pitches the Lakeland town into a purgatorial timelessness and barrenness which seems to mock the traditional Romantic sublime:

Romantic, ugly, grey and horrid, not dead
Enough to be forgotten, nor living enough to be damned. All
This is limbo...⁸

While alluding to Dante, whom Nicholson revered, the use of *terza rima* also nods towards another important influence on his works, T. S. Eliot, who had recently employed the form in *Four Quartets* (1943). Combining a Wordsworthian theme

with a form that shifted between Dantean tradition and modernist innovation, Nicholson moves between conventions of literary periodization (so his choice in the poem involves his shifting between a landscape steeped in tradition and one which was trying to muddle along with industrial modernity). *Terza rima* is a form peculiarly suited to such dynamic manoeuvres with time. The rhyming first and third lines are caught in a continual toing-and-froing through the interlocking rhymes of the second line, which send the poem forward only to turn back upon itself with something of a 'two steps forward one step back' momentum. Moreover, it is a form which emphasises how rhyme imposes choices (the more so, since there are fewer rhyme words in English than in Italian); but it is also a form which allows for twists and turns, ditherings and counter-thoughts. Nicholson works himself a degree of freedom through his recourse to half-rhymes, which, in conjunction with his occasional shifts into perfect-rhyme, trace his poem's undulating sense of the fatedness of its own predicament.

Both poems are based on the familiar conviction that the reality of travel can never live up to its anticipation. Such stubborn pessimism raises the question of why you would ever bother to go anywhere in the first place. Although in both poems there is also an implicit questioning of that attitude and its attendant impulse to be always 'if-onlying' – only to defer. Appropriately, then, Wordsworth begins his poem with the suggestion of a detour. The subtitle advises:

(See the various Poems the scene of which is laid upon the Banks of the Yarrow; in particular, the exquisite Ballad of Hamilton, beginning

'Busk ye, busk ye my bonny, bonny Bride,
Busk ye, busk ye my winsome Marrow!'—)

'Busk ye, busk ye' is an entreaty to 'get ready, get going', but the epigraph, along with the circumlocutory, awkwardly expressed introduction, waylays the reader; at the point of beginning Wordsworth's poem about Yarrow, we are told to go and read others. The subtitle also announces Yarrow as a place with poetic associations to which the present poem is indebted and anxious to preserve. Wordsworth was prompted to compose the poem following a walking tour through Scotland with Dorothy in 1803. Dorothy's *Recollections* note that 'being so near to the Yarrow, we

could not but think of the possibility of going thither, but came to the conclusion of reserving the pleasure for some future time'.⁹ In the poem, the speaker is accompanied by his 'true love', who wishes to take a detour to visit Yarrow, but he reasons against the trip, arguing that it is better to leave Yarrow as an imagined ideal: 'We have a vision of our own; / Ah! why should we undo it?' (ll. 51-2). The prefix 'un' in this poem repeatedly plays upon the possibilities of something being either not done or yet to be done: 'Be Yarrow Stream unseen, unknown!'. Yarrow must be preserved in a present state of being unvisited, the speaker warns, 'or we shall rue it' (ll. 49-50).

The justification offered, though, is a precarious one that won't bear too much scrutiny: the poem ends with the consoling thought that in times of sorrow the couple will be able to think of Yarrow and all the pleasures that it still holds in store for them. But the awareness that those pleasures will never live up to their dreams renders this consolation, if not futile, at least highly fragile. Denying themselves now, the couple spare themselves the inevitable disappointments and regrets of reality, as if, Wordsworth implies, being in control of one's disappointments and disillusionments is preferable to having them inflicted by circumstance. Although the poem recounts an event in the past, the majority of stanzas are in present tense because they recount the pair's conversation about whether or not to go, so that the poem turns upon the irony of making a possibility that has already been lost still seem present and up for debate.

In Nicholson's poem, too, shifts in tense draw attention to the temporal ironies that play out between past decisions, future plans and present action. He begins by relating how plans made in the summer have failed to come to fruition before the telltale signs of autumn have begun to emerge. From the beginning, the poetry makes felt how past decisions come to bear on the present through its placement of the word 'Now', conspicuous and pregnant, at the end of the first line:

All through the summer I planned to visit Askam. Now
Dusk falls before the smoke rises from the slate,
Leaves curl up like caterpillars on the bough

Of the sycamores by the public library, dahlias are dark and wet,

Children shout again in the playground of the school,
Mauve toadstools knuckle the bowling green. And yet

Askam remains an intention and a goal,
Or perhaps a sin of omission, an opportunity missed,
A place marked on a map that hands let fall

(ll. 1-9)

The lines carefully mark the passage of time, holding in suspension the moment between dusk falling and smoke rising. 'Now' sustains a present tense held lingeringly on the cusp of one season's passing into another. The familiar rhythms of natural and community life are made to sound at once comforting and humdrum. Rhymes capture thought in the process of recollecting and reorienting itself as the interlocking sounds and the enjambment between tercets impel movement while allowing room for a moment's lingering hesitation. The effect is one of thought called back upon itself in afterthought: new sentences admitting of alternative possibilities begin close to the end of lines ('And yet...'), as if a complete line of thought cannot be achieved without sprawling into divergences. The movement across lines locates that moment of 'And yet' as the turning point at which future potential – 'Askam remains an intention and a goal' – becomes unrealised past: 'Or perhaps a sin of omission, an opportunity missed'. As time collapses possibility, 'miss' and 'sin' slip into 'omission' through an anagrammatic rhyme which warns that letting things slide might have moral repercussions.

'Missed' and 'fall' are left hanging at the end of the lines so that it is not until afterwards that the pang of what has been missed is felt, and it is only in the following tercet that what 'hands let fall' proves to have been not merely dropped but irrevocably lost '// Out of the carriage window or into the fire' (l. 10). A dropped map, 'a letter lost / In the post' (ll. 10-11): these are the instances of everyday carelessness and circumstance that comprise the small-scale human tragedy of 'opportunity missed'. In Nicholson's poem the sense of futility that arises from things not quite reaching the mark nor arriving at their destination takes on a greater resonance, as the failure to reach Askam is imbued with a sense of all the lost opportunities that follow unwittingly from such little slips of chance. The difference between Nicholson's and Wordsworth's unvisiting comes down to

intentionality. Wordsworth deliberately does not go in order to avoid disappointment; Nicholson dithers then finds it is too late.

In both cases, the place's being so nearly within reach does not necessarily make it any more tantalising. 'Though so near, we will not turn / Into the Dale of Yarrow' (ll. 39-40), Wordsworth resolves; while for Nicholson proximity takes the edge off of any feeling of urgency: 'But Askam is real enough and clear to be seen / Across the estuary, a mile and a half at most' (ll. 11-12). To the casual observer looking across the estuary from Millom, Askam seems within easy reach (and it is made to seem closer by a slagbank left over from the ironworks that stretches out from the coast like a path across the sea). The place appears closer than it really is: a 'mile and a half at most' as the crow flies, though the journey along the curve of the coast is 'not twenty miles by road nor twenty minutes in the train' (l. 13). Still, the mundane practicalities of transportation will get you there; the place is no remote fantasyland: 'Askam is real enough'.

That casual remark leads to the more abstract question of what exactly is 'real enough'? For Wordsworth and his companion, it is enough to know that Yarrow exists without their needing to see it for themselves. Accordingly, they:

...will not go
Today, nor yet tomorrow;
Enough if in our hearts we know
There's such a place as Yarrow.
(ll. 45-8)

'Enough' is a matter of not having too much reality. '[S]uch a place' must always exist elsewhere, an elsewhere which is held at arm's length and yet, in a crucial sense, gives them something to hold on to. Even as the speaker declares 'we will not go' the rhymes revisit the same sound 'not go/tomorrow/know/Yarrow' (where normally only the second and fourth lines rhyme in the ballad stanza), as if the resolution that needs to be repeated in order to remain convincing still wants to cling to what is being revoked. The ambiguity within the line 'in our hearts we know / There's such a place as Yarrow' rests between a primary sense, 'we know in our heart it exists', and the secondary meaning, 'we know it exists as a place in our

hearts', which leaves it unclear whether to privilege the ideal of the place as much – if not more – than the place itself.

Nicholson, on the other hand, is concerned to portray a 'real enough' image of Askam as it stands in the present, rather than upholding an idealised image of the Lake District as it has been handed down by a literary past. In his prose writings on tourism in the Lake District, Nicholson is critical of an attitude that would preserve the landscape as a scenic ideal, warning that 'Nature, indeed, the physical reality in which alone we have our physical being, is in danger of being seen as a mere dream, a half-believed-in vision'.¹⁰ Unlike the remote idyll of Yarrow, Askam is a site of post-industrial decline, with its 'chimney stacks that never smoke' and 'hills / Of rubble overgrown with weed' (ll. 14-15). The chimneys of the ironworks had not smoked since the plant was closed in 1918, but the tall stacks still towered amidst the landscape, as did the 'grey slagbanks' that Nicholson describes 'rear[ing] between // The low yellow dunes and high green fells' (ll. 15-16).¹¹ The latter description of the land seems eye-rollingly banal at first: the stuff of children's drawings – where the sand is always yellow, the grass green, the hills high.¹² It suggests a deliberately pared down observation, stripped of any pretensions to imagination or poetry (either that, or it is just a bad line). But on second thoughts, it turns out to be surprisingly good: there is a pleasing sense of novelty within its very triteness, as if it reminds us of what we have forgotten to see with a child's simplicity. Nicholson seems determined to avoid an over-determinedly obscure or poetic way of looking at the landscape in order to present an image of Askam in which the marks of industry are not seen as a corruption, to make it 'real enough to be seen', and seen for what it really is.

Having contemplated that reality, however, Nicholson veers into abstraction, and the decision to visit or unvisit Askam suddenly takes on vast moral significance:

The greater commandments I readily know,
Not to kill, nor steal, nor love incontinently –
These have not always to be thought of. But the lightning scores no

Signposts in stone beside the choices that lie

Like a spreading maze before me – whether to go or stay,
Whether to speak or be silent, whether to raise an eye

To an eye, a hand to a hand, turn this or that way.
(ll. 19-25)

This comes as a shock. The trip to Askam had hardly been mooted as a spree of murder, theft and adultery. Nicholson's invoking the commandments reveals the extent to which the decision to visit Askam or not is bound up with his own self-doubts, his lack of resolution and ethical deliberations. It is reassuring to have things set in stone with all the unequivocal authority of a 'thou shalt not'.

Commandments take away the responsibility of having to consider for yourself the right way to act (or not) since all the choices and denials have already been made for you. Shifting into perfect rhyme at this point ('know'/'no', 'lie'/'eye', 'stay'/'way'), Nicholson projects into his verse the certainty and order that he seeks in the patterns of life. The lines allow for a momentary belief that things might be that simple, that morals might be as rigidly fixed as they are clinched in the rhyme: 'know'/'no'. As the framing rhymes of the *terza rima* stanza, the homophones hold out the promise of assurance in the rightness of renunciation (that we could know to say 'no'). However, as the line runs into the next tercet, it becomes clear that that 'no' only registers a negation or lack of certainty in which 'the lightning scores no // Signposts in stone'.

Nicholson was a Christian but he had mixed feelings about how far the natural world could be said to manifest clear signs from God. In his book on William Cowper he noted that the eighteenth-century Evangelicals who influenced Cowper's verse could be 'too anxious to find sermons in stones' in their belief that Nature could be read as God's book.¹³ By looking to nature only to find religious instruction, he argued, you would 'cease to see Nature as a reality', would 'cease to see the world at all and see only texts framed by briars and blackberries like the words of Scripture hung on the walls of Sunday-schools'.¹⁴ His hesitancy about projecting moral lessons upon the natural world is implicit in his finding no 'signposts in stone', nor any sermonising guidance of the 'eye for an eye' variety for which the poem looks in vain. At the realisation that one's choices must be self-

determined, the poem loses direction, sprawling into run on lines between tercets and latching onto a series of repetitions demanding whether to do this, whether to do that. Once one begins to question the underlying design, Nicholson implies, things unravel: one question merely proliferates into another into another.

Beyond the scriptural context, the question of whether to 'raise an eye // To an eye', suggests something of the difficulties involved in everyday social exchanges: to 'raise an eye' might also convey disapproval, while raising 'an eye // To an eye' could communicate a willingness to engage by returning a glance. Similarly, to raise 'a hand' might suggest an act of violence or else the cordial gesture of returning a wave. Equivocations centre on the possibilities of communication or miscommunication: should he 'speak or be silent'? The uncertainties surrounding social relations take on the significance of moral dilemmas, as Nicholson becomes a kind of Cumbrian Prufrock for whom such endless questionings are bound up with his indecision about whether or not to go and make his visit. With a degree of Eliotic hand-wringing, Nicholson presents himself as someone who is unable to fully grasp the present even as he is aware that it eludes him, whose insights always miss the vital moment, and who resigns himself to the irony of a life lived in retrospect: 'Aware of the wild importance of each moment, though // Unaware of the meaning of the moment when it comes' (ll. 27-8). Alliteration lets the line slip by almost too quickly, as though one event merges with its successor before an elusive meaning can be imposed upon the flux of experience. *Terza rima* is especially good at capturing the lapses of deferred recognition here, where the reversal or backward motion revisits what has been passed by (only to pass on again).

The final tercet then introduces a series of scattered moments which we are poised to infer are rich in potential significance, though what that significance is remains obscure:

The wader on the marsh, the bugloss on the sands, the half-acknowledged smile

From a girl on a bicycle, let these be bright as berries.

Without their trail of consequence pointing to a final trial.

(ll. 31-3)

The simplicity of these isolated images allows them to exist in the present without the pressure of anticipation or the risk of regret. A girl on a bicycle glides in and is gone again before we have time to think what meaning to attach to the moment. Possibilities only half-glimpsed and half-acknowledged, because they are unfulfilled, leave space for promise. So Nicholson is content to let things be: 'So let Askam remain, at least for a while' (l. 30).

And yet – like the earlier shifts and turns and pauses for thought in which the poem second-guesses itself – the last line voices a niggling anxiety. Even as it hopes to dispel any thought of consequences, inevitably, it cannot help but invoke them. We might almost wish that the poem came to an end with, 'let these be bright as berries.' And the full stop at the end of the line seems complicit in this hope. But grammatically the last line cannot really be set off from the penultimate one, just as consequences cannot really be held off or contained. Form demands a link: 'Without their trail of consequence leading to a final trial' remains structurally incomplete unless it is linked to what has come before. The final line pre-empts consequences even as it is unable to suspend belief in an inevitable chain of causality; so 'trail' leads to 'trial' as the anagram provides a reminder of how readily one thing leads to another. As both a judgement and a test, the dual sense of 'trial' suggests that until you actually put something to the test, you cannot know how it will turn out, or how you might ultimately be judged.

The 'final trial', of course, also evokes the Last Judgement – a trial in which the consequences of all action (or inaction, if we recall Nicholson's reference to the 'sin of omission') will be brought to bear. Despite ending on this phrase, the poem ultimately evades finality, since the Last Judgement invokes a future-oriented worldview in which fear or consolation are to be found in the possibilities of a hereafter, determined by the here and now. Nicholson's unvisiting directs him to a series of moral reflections and to the conclusion that renunciation is not a cause for regret but a means of sustaining hope for the time to come. Correspondingly, each step of *terza rima* looks towards a new horizon of possibility based on what has come before; the third line provides the cue for what might be possible, based squarely on what has already occurred in the first.

While the religious turn in 'Askam Unvisited' might seem to have taken us a long way from 'Yarrow Unvisited', the link between finding one's direction in nature and the more abstract notion of finding one's direction in life is drawn together in a comparison Nicholson later made between Wordsworth and Dante in his introduction to a selection of Wordsworth's poems that he edited in 1949 (the two writers are also brought together in 'Askam Unvisited' through the treatment of Wordsworthian subject-matter in Dantean form). The connection Nicholson makes is based on his predecessors' insights into what he describes, somewhat mystically, as 'the Way'. Comparing the two poets, Nicholson comments, 'Wordsworth's vision of the Way is much the vaguer, much the mistier of the two. The Landscape is there, but where is the track, and what is the right direction?'¹⁵ But however misty the path, Nicholson observes, Wordsworth oriented himself in relation to two constants: Childhood and Nature. These two sources provide 'courage and faith' and reassuring continuity: 'Nature is still there, and whatever we may have failed to be, we have all been children.'¹⁶ On the face of it, the statement looks like another instance of Nicholson's knack for pointing out the blindingly obvious. Noting the importance of childhood and nature in the works of his Romantic predecessor is hardly a startling insight, nor is the fact that we were all children once (though in some cases it may be hard to believe), but the passing concession to 'whatever we may have failed to be' quietly intuits the reason why we might be drawn to seek courage and faith in these sources in the first place. Self-recriminations surrounding what we have failed to be or do will be assuaged by the recollection of childhood experience, or by the simple assurance that 'the landscape is there', that 'Nature is still there', that something remains to compensate for all the missed opportunities and fallings short.

Nicholson cites *The Prelude* as the profound expression of this sentiment, but something of it is there in both his own and Wordsworth's 'Unvisited' poems too. 'Yarrow Unvisited' ends with a proleptic gesture:

If Care with freezing years should come,
And wandering seem but folly,
Should we be loth to stir from home,
And yet be melancholy;

Should life be dull, and spirits low,
'Twill soothe us in our sorrow
That earth has something yet to show,
The bonny Holms of Yarrow!

(ll. 57-64)

Wordsworth calls up a spectral image of an old age yet to be lived. For all the anticipation of frozen years, stagnation and melancholy, the lines are surprisingly upbeat. Rhymes sweep across the final four lines (rather than just the second and fourth rhymed lines of the ballad form) as the poem ends with something of the 'busk ye, busk ye' chivvying jollity with which it began. That cheeriness, and the sense of continuity sustained by rhyme, seems a little strained, however. While the lines offer a generous view of old age, where the pair find consolation in what the world has yet to offer even if they are never to enjoy it for themselves, a sense of loss is lurking within the prospect of gain. Such soothing consolations bring cold comfort if the wisdom of age is looked forward to as an escape from desire, when the pangs of regret are avoided owing to a diminished sense of urgency or idealism. (Nicholson has a poignant line on Wordsworth's later years as a time 'when poetry had failed like desire'.)¹⁷ But the 'if' and 'should's that conclude 'Yarrow Unvisited', and the optative mood of the poem as a whole, decline to settle fully into resignation or closure. Wordsworth keeps faith with the 'treasured dreams' of Yarrow's past by projecting them into a future in which that past is always part of a continual present. In this way, the persistence of imagined alternatives in both Wordsworth's and Nicholson's unvisited poems sustains a temporal continuity which points to, but ultimately defers, a final trial, where, in Eliot's words,

What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present.
Footfalls echo in the memory
Down the passage which we did not take.¹⁸

But Wordsworth and Nicholson did eventually take that passage – they did eventually visit their respective 'unvisited' places. For the reader who is aware of the 'sequel' poems 'Yarrow Visited' and 'Yarrow Revisited', and Nicholson's 'Askam

Visited', the arguments and questionings over the decision not to go may seem like futile exercises in false-logic or self-deception. Alternatively, the decision-making surrounding their 'unvisiting' – despite or perhaps because of the inevitability of their later visit – might be seen as symptomatic of the need to provide oneself with a narrative in which choice and the unexpected still have a part to play. The 'unvisited' poems provide a testimony to that familiar need and attendant impulse, while knowing things to be determined, to act as though they are not. In this sense, the workings of rhyme answer to two divergent but related needs: the need to believe in the freedom of choice within a set of given perimeters, and the need to believe in the existence of order and underlying design.

In a poem written in October 1940 (four years before 'Askam Unvisited' was published), Nicholson outlines his newly arrived at sense of religious resolve, and the path he had accordingly set out for himself. 'Now That I Have Made My Decision' concludes:

It is time that I cease to stare towards the horizon for a goal,
But gear my gaze to the near path cogged out for my soul,
Or step if it need through the black bracken of the untracked fell.
(ll. 8-10)

Rather than staring abstractedly at the unvisited places of a distant horizon, Nicholson focuses his gaze on the 'near path'. The poem seems to confirm Nicholson's belief in moral commitment, though 'a doubt is raised', David Cooper observes, 'by the use of the mechanistic verb "cogged", which intimates that this rootedness has been preordained rather than self-determined'.¹⁹ The verb 'gear' similarly suggests a mechanized shift along a preset track or groove, but weirdly it is precisely because of the mechanical connotations of these words that Nicholson's direction of thought seems at once entirely unexpected and entirely determined. 'Gear' and 'cogged' work to uncover a submerged metaphor: in talking of 'gearing oneself up', one doesn't often have actual gears in mind, but the phrase is then made literal by that surprising word 'cog'. In doing so, Nicholson turns mechanized ways of thinking in on themselves and uses them to his own advantage, exercising independence of mind while allowing himself to think that whatever path he takes

is the one which had already been set for him. Likewise, the 'goal' set out for the 'soul' slots the words into place with the reassuring sense that no other could have fitted so well (in comparison to the off-rhyme of 'goal' and 'fall' which describes the missed destination of 'Askam Unvisited').

Cooper observes that 'the image of enforced fixity is a core feature of Nicholson's spatial poetics' and attributes this to the fact that, having contracted tuberculosis during his teens, Nicholson was obliged to live a confined existence from a young age, residing in a sanitarium for a twenty months and then remaining in Millom for the rest of his life.²⁰ For Cooper, 'Now that I Have Made My Decision' sums up Nicholson's subsequent preoccupation with the relationship between '(spiritual) liberation and (physical) boundedness'.²¹ The last line of the poem, 'Or step if it need through the black bracken of the untracked fell', reveals how this tension between liberation and boundedness impels Nicholson to imagine alternative possibilities, to turn on the point of contemplating his set path into a line which begins, 'Or ...'. The verse then picks its way through the over-determined internal rhymes of 'black bracken'/'untracked' in the process of tracing out an alternative, undefined route. As well as establishing a path for the soul, the poem is about Nicholson's making his way as a religious poet. It begins: 'NOW THAT I HAVE MADE MY DECISION and felt God on my tongue', and here the workings of rhyme might be seen as a way of 'feeling' God (the correct path, the shaping influence) on the 'tongue' of a poem. 'It is time that I trained my tongue to speak of God (l.2), he announces, 'Not with pretended wisdom, nor with presumption, / But as a tree might speak of rain' (l. 3-4). If trees could speak, they might express gratitude for something which they receive and are sustained by naturally, effortlessly and unquestioningly. Speaking of God, for Nicholson, requires 'train[ing]' his tongue (instructing, directing), and yet the word 'train' also brings into play the sense of shaping a tree to grow in a certain direction, to grow naturally but according to a pattern.

The final line of 'Now That I Have Made My Decision' which ends on an 'untracked fell' of the Lake District brings to mind Wordsworth's lines at the beginning of *The Prelude*, which place him on the brink of setting out:

...whither shall I turn,
By road or pathway, or through trackless field,
Up hill or down, or shall some floating thing
Upon the river point me out my course?²²

Moments before these lines Wordsworth proclaims, 'the earth is all before me', beginning his poem, as if often noted, with an allusion to the situation facing Adam and Eve at the close of *Paradise Lost* ('The world was all before them [...] and / Providence their guide').²³ Writing in blank verse, Wordsworth adopts a form which combines constraint with energy and variation. Here, the lines impel movement within a set frame: the line ending on 'turn' collects itself before leading to a succession of 'or's which present alternative routes. Even while the choice remains open, the way is not without direction. 'By', 'through', 'up', 'down': Wordsworth is aware of the way he is going, even if he is unsure of the way it leads, and he looks for a course to be pointed out to him, even if it is only set arbitrarily by 'some floating thing'.

By collecting himself, taking stock, surveying possibilities, before pursuing something floating just out of reach, Wordsworth offers to us a way of thinking about the direction of thought at work in his poetic compositions. Whether it was the prospect of the unvisited Yarrow or, on a grander scale, the idea of the unwritten *Recluse* floating before him, Wordsworth first needed to make sense of where he had been, where he was, and what had led him to this point. Only then could he pursue what might be lying ahead. As the poems of 'Yarrow Unvisited', 'Yarrow Visited', and 'Yarrow Revisited' each sustain a backward-and-forward looking momentum that keeps Yarrow in the distant foreground, so Wordsworth's writing and rewriting of *The Prelude* always keeps *The Recluse* in sight. In Wordsworth's and Nicholson's works the journey towards the unvisited, unwritten, unknown is always bending back in memory, so that directions taken and decisions made are informed by an awareness of how present action involves both looking to the past and envisioning the future. By giving voice to this forward and backward looking impulse, rhyme gives a pattern and discernible order to the decision-making process. But as the 'unvisiting' poems reveal, even once a direction has been set and a decision reached, the shifts and turns in tense and stress allow for

wavering and undeciding – just as one might shift weight from foot to foot before deciding down which path to turn.

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¹ William Wordsworth, 'Yarrow Unvisited', *Poems in Two Volumes, and Other Poems 1800-1807* (Ithaca, 1983), ll. 51-2.

² For an account of the benefits of this line of thinking, see Adam Phillips, *Missing Out: In Praise of the Unlived Life* (London, 2012)

³ See, for example, Stephen Gill, *Wordsworth's Revisitings* (Oxford, 2011) and Christopher Salvesen, *The Landscape of Memory* (London, 1965); Norman Nicholson, 'On Being a Provincial', *The Listener*, 52 (1954), p. 248.

⁴ Norman Nicholson, 'From a Boat at Coniston', *Collected Poems*, ed. by Neil Curry (London, 2008), p. 195. (All references will be taken from this edition.)

⁵ David Cooper, 'The Poetics of Place and Space: Wordsworth, Norman Nicholson and the Lake District', *Literature Compass*, 16 (2008), p. 819.

⁶ Peter McDonald, *Sound Intentions: The Workings of Rhyme in Nineteenth-Century Poetry* (Oxford, 2012), pp. 37, 112.

⁷ See Mark MacLean, *A Short History of Ireleth and Askam-in-Furness* (Hamilton, 1997).

⁸ Nicholson, 'Askam Visited', pp. 38-9.

⁹ Dorothy Wordsworth, *Recollections of a Tour Made in Scotland* (New Haven and London, 1997), p. 204. For an account of the tour and Wordsworth's poetic response, see Gill, *Revisitings*, pp. 160-3.

¹⁰ Norman Nicholson, *The Lakers: The Adventures of the First Tourists* (London, 1959), p. 208.

¹¹ MacLean, *A Short History of Ireleth and Askam-in-Furness*, p. 41.

¹² Compare J. K. Stephens's parody of Wordsworth's bleating 'articulate monotony' in noting 'That grass is green, lakes damp, and mountains steep'.

¹³ Norman Nicholson, *William Cowper* (London, 1951), pp. 11-12.

¹⁴ Nicholson, *William Cowper*, p. 13.

¹⁵ Norman Nicholson, *Wordsworth: An Introduction and a Selection* (London, 1949), p. xxv.

¹⁶ Nicholson, *Wordsworth*, p. xxvi.

¹⁷ See, Nicholson, 'To the River Duddon', p. 25.

¹⁸ T. S. Eliot, 'Burnt Norton', *Four Quartets, The Complete Poems and Plays* (London, 2004), p. 171.

¹⁹ David Cooper, "'Matter Matters": Topographical and Theological Space in the Poetry of Norman Nicholson', *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 39 (2009), 169-85 (p. 171).

²⁰ See Nicholson's moving autobiographical account of his childhood experiences in *Wednesday Early Closing* (London, 1975).

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² William Wordsworth, *The Fourteen Book Prelude*, ed. by W. J. B. Owen (Ithaca, 1985), l. 27-30.

²³ John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, XII. 646-7.