

Transcendence Desired, Transcendence Denied: 'Tintern Abbey' and the 'Rime of the Ancient Mariner'

Thomas J. Brennan

In volume I of the 1800 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth added a note after 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' arguing that one of the 'great defects' of the poem is 'that [the Mariner] does not act, but is constantly acted upon.'¹ Yet, might we read this supposed defect as Wordsworth's anxiety about his own condition in 'Tintern Abbey'? I'd like to consider the passivity of both poems' speakers in connection with a desire for transcendence—deriving from Nature as with Wordsworth or from the supernatural as with Coleridge—a desire that both poets share but can never realize.

To articulate this understanding of desire, we must first consider the subject who supposedly experiences it. In *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Jacques Lacan describes alienation in the desiring subject. To illustrate this idea, he proposes the example of someone being robbed. The robber presents the victim with the choice: 'Your money or your life.' The utterance exposes the peripheral quality to the choice: '*Your money or your life!* If I choose the money, I lose both. If I choose life, I have life without the money, namely a life deprived of something. I think I have made myself clear.'² This sense of deprivation also extends to larger issues such as freedom. With regard to Hegel's master-slave dialectic, Lacan notices a parallel linguistic formulation: '*Your freedom or your life!* If [the slave] chooses freedom, he loses both immediately—if he chooses life, he has life deprived of freedom.'³ In both cases what language expresses is not the subject's existence but its failure to exist. As Bruce Fink says, though the subject can be spoken of, it is only as an expectation of something coming to be that it exists.⁴ This expectation represents desire—the desire that constitutes the subject.

Now if we apply this idea to the desire for transcendence, we see that the word 'transcendence' marks an expectation on the part of the subject. Like the child who asks for 'milk,' the subject questing for transcendence articulates this idea as a word. The word 'milk' does not issue from a prior experience of fullness but because this good is now experienced as absent. In this way, the breast withdrawn from the child becomes the site of frustration and even anger but also of language. Only by confronting the lack of milk and its attendant grief can the child begin to use its lips to articulate the abstract but very real linguistic concept of 'milk.' Transcendence, I would suggest, works in the same way. Rather than issuing from the fullness of an experience, let us say of nature, its pull on the subject derives from its withdrawal or failure. The word

¹ *Lyrical Ballads and Other Poems, 1797-1800 by William Wordsworth*, James Butler and Karen Green, eds., (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1992), 791.

² Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: Norton, 1981), 212.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance*, (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1995), 52.

‘transcendence’ covers a hole or lack in the subject that recapitulates its subjection to language as a system of signifiers. This anxiety about desire – specifically desire inevitably fixed in language – preoccupies Wordsworth and Coleridge.

To turn to ‘Tintern Abbey’—Wordsworth’s titles (both the long one ‘LINES written a few miles above TINTERN ABBEY, On revisiting the banks of the WYE during a tour, July 13, 1798,’ and the short form often used by the poet)⁵ create expectations that the poem does not immediately appear to fulfil. For nowhere beyond the title is the Abbey either mentioned or explicitly described. Critics have focused on the surroundings rather than the ruins. On the one hand, Geoffrey Hartmann, Harold Bloom, and J. Robert Barth have offered conjectures about Wordsworth’s eighteenth-century hermit as all that remains of the Abbey’s earlier role—a search for transcendence through Romantic inwardness.⁶ On the other hand, Marjorie Levinson maintains that Wordsworth idealizes the scene in order to assimilate it to a ‘devotion’ that is individual and private rather than communal and collective.⁷

Though Wordsworth had only a marginal connection to conventional religion in the late 1790s, he would have recognized in this dilapidated monument a reminder of radical national change. And he would have had a general knowledge of abbatial churches, the smoke of liturgical incense, and religious communities in quest of transcendence. All these were gone from Tintern Abbey but implicit in any understanding of it. What remains? A forest temple, suggested by the ‘lofty cliffs’ (l.5); the smoke of chimneys from ‘pastoral farms’ (l.17); perhaps an occasional hermit or vagrant, and—briefly—William Wordsworth and his sister Dorothy. The poet may have thought that these parallel sequences of images of what once *was* and what now *is* would constitute familiar pictures and hopefully recognizable metaphors for his readers: the implicit Abbey scene roughly reconstituted by the historical imagination from a few fragments, and the narrator’s explicit view of Nature. The virtual abbey thus becomes an indirect way of speaking about what he actually desires Nature’s affect on him will be. And if this communion is not possible for him anymore, maybe his sister can make it work. In her experience of transcendence through Nature, he can recollect ‘the language of my former heart’ (l.118).

We should notice the passivity in this undertaking, both for Dorothy and, ultimately, William. ‘Nature,’ he tells her, ‘never did betray/ The heart that loved her’ (ll.123-124). He has this confidence because Nature ‘can so inform/ The mind that is within us, so impress/ With quietness and beauty, and so feed/ With lofty thoughts’ that ‘The dreary intercourse of daily life,/ Shall

⁵ *Lyrical Ballads and Other Poems by William Wordsworth*, 116-120. Subsequent references to ‘Tintern Abbey’ follow this text.

⁶ Geoffrey Hartmann, *Wordsworth’s Poetry: 1787-1814*, (New Haven: Yale UP, 1964), 175-176; Harold Bloom, *Poetry and Repression*, (New Haven: Yale UP, 1976), 71-73; J. Robert Barth, ‘The Role of Humankind in the Poetry of Wordsworth and Coleridge,’ *The Wordsworth Circle* 22.3 (Summer 1991): 161.

⁷ Marjorie Levinson, *Wordsworth’s Great Period Poems*, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986), 29.

[n]e'er prevail against us... (ll.126-131). 'Inform the mind,' 'impress with beauty,' 'feed with thoughts'—in each case Nature acts on Dorothy. Earlier in the poem, similar expressions also convey William's passivity. Consider, for example, his evocation of the 'forms of beauty' as it appeared versions of the poem until 1827:

Though absent long,
These forms of beauty have not been to me,
As is a landscape to a blind man's eye (ll.23-25).

Of course Wordsworth is the absent one, but as presented in these lines, it almost seems as if the 'forms of beauty' have deserted him rather than vice-versa. The revision does nothing to restore the agency to Wordsworth:

These beauteous forms
Through a long absence have not been to me
As is a landscape to a blind man's eye.

Though 'beauteous forms' makes a less absolute claim about Nature as the eternal repository for beauty, his passivity in the face of this beauty is constant.

Nature 'informs' the mind because it impresses the speaker (l.126). So Wordsworth claims at the beginning of the poem 'steep and lofty cliffs... impress/ Thoughts of more deep seclusion' (ll.4-7). Are the 'thoughts' Wordsworth's? Is he expressing his mind's re-working of the seclusion offered by the cliffs into something 'more deep' and originating in consciousness? Or do these 'thoughts' come to him from beyond his conscious control? He suggests this second possibility later on when he evokes the image he carries in his mind of the Abbey and its surroundings: 'The picture of the mind revives again' (l.62). But the revival is automatic, seemingly beyond his control.

Finally, Nature feeds Dorothy as it has supposedly fed him. Contemplating the care he has felt from Nature in the past, he rejoices that the present moment has some potential. Thus his 'pleasing thoughts/ That in this moment there is life and food/ For future years'(ll.63-65). Yet we should also notice how he qualifies his hope: 'And so I dare to hope/ Though changed, no doubt, from what I was' (ll.65-66). The past—with its 'coarser pleasures' (l.74) and 'glad animal movements' (l.75)—exerts a stronger pull on him than the present. This pull is evident in his recollection of the 'lonely rooms' and in the 'din/ Of towns and cities' that still haunts him (ll.26-27). But this vacancy also highlights the withdrawal of something good whose absence he now feels. We might imagine this good thing as the 'blessed mood' whose effects may have been 'but a vain belief' (l.51). Most importantly, this mood has left him passive. His 'eye' was perhaps 'made quiet by the power/ Of harmony and the deep power of joy' (ll.48-49). But is it really distinguishable from the 'empty rooms' and their lassitude?

As Wordsworth noticed, passivity also characterizes Coleridge's Mariner.

Periodically, a 'woful agony' (l.579) affects him until he can tell his story. 'Strange power of speech' also attends these repetitions (l.587). As a result, some critics have argued that the Mariner suffers from a repetition compulsion of the kind that cannot be worked through. The Mariner cannot go back to the trauma—perhaps the shooting of the Albatross—and repeat the pain so as to dispel it. Rather the trauma is the kind observed by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. People revisit traumas that they never master; the Mariner's telling the story thus repeats his thralldom to his past. The crime and the telling of the crime are not really distinct for him. According to Susan Eilenberg, such repetition discredits the poem's final 'moral.'⁸

While I agree that the past does exert a powerful pull on the Mariner, and that trauma may well describe what he has experienced, I would suggest that his passivity is the difference that accounts for this story's power. What makes the passivity something powerful is its connection to the silence in the poem. For example, the Mariner pauses before recounting his killing of the Albatross, and the Wedding Guest notices his frightening appearance:

'God save thee ancient Mariner!
From the fiends that plague thee thus! –
Why look'st thou so?'—With my crossbow
I shot the Albatross. (PW 161 79-82).

This reaction to the Mariner's appearance before he makes his disclosure suggests that the Mariner overcomes a powerful silence in order to speak. This tension has nothing to do with cause and effect explanations of the sequence of events. The crew's equivocations about whether the Mariner acted rightly in killing the bird illustrate their desire for this kind of explanation. So, too, do the Notes that eventually characterize the crew as 'accomplices in the crime.' In both cases Coleridge emphasizes that the desire for a cause and effect explanation—another of the 'great defects' Wordsworth attributed to the poem—is not only strong among the crew but also among certain types of readers and critics.

Silence, though, suggests that the Mariner is moving beyond cause and effect relations and into a world governed by fear and awe. Entering the Pacific Ocean, the ship disrupts the silence: 'And we were the first that ever burst/ Into that silent sea' (PW 161 105-6). Later the Mariner says that he and the crew 'did speak only to break/ The silence of the sea' (PW 161 109-10). Speech now becomes chatter that only reinforces the powerful silence around them. We see a similar stress on the inefficacy of any language after the Mariner's ship sinks. Upon bringing the Mariner out of the water, the Pilot's boy mixes speech and crazed chatter:

⁸ Susan Eilenberg, 'Voice and Ventriloquy in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,"' in *Coleridge, Keats and Shelley*, ed. Peter J. Kitson, (New York: St. Martin's, 1996), 48.

I took the oars: the Pilot's Boy,
 Who now doth crazy go,
 Laughed loud and long, and all the while
 His eyes went to and fro.
 'Ha! ha!' quoth he, 'full plain I see,
 The devil knows how to row' (PW 161 564-9).

Even in madness, the Pilot's Boy appeals to common sense and to cause and effect to explain what he is seeing. Ironically, the boy's surmise is not unreasonable, given that by the Mariner's admission, he must have looked like a dead man in the water. Likewise, the Mariner also thinks the Wedding Guest has mistaken him for a ghost.

'Full plain,' however, does not characterize the Mariner. Rather the silence punctuating his story points out the ambivalence in his passivity. The nightmare vision of 'the thousand thousand slimy things' (PW 161 238) in the sea suggests that he has no more choice about living or dying than they do. Yet, this lack of agency also characterizes his more positive moments. He blesses the 'water-snakes' though unaware of doing it and attributes this capacity to his 'kind saint' (PW 161 521). Reflecting on blessing the water snakes, he claims that 'no tongue/ Their beauty might declare' (PW 161 282-3). Yet, if he is overcome by an awed silence when confronted with their beauty, we can say that he is equally overcome when confronted with the 'slimy things'—only now he feels horror.

Whether the Mariner's experience is a positive one (as with the water-snakes) or a negative one (as with the 'slimy things'), it always derives from and brings him back to the sense of a lack or a gap in himself. This emptiness is evident at the end of the poem and allows him to become eloquent about what he does not have:

O sweeter than the marriage feast,
 'Tis sweeter far to me,
 To walk together to the kirk
 With a goodly company! –
 To walk together to the kirk,
 And all together pray. (PW 161 601-4)

The Mariner expresses his desire for human community here and finds it on religious practice. But the repetition of the infinitives suggests that this is more of an ideal that he desires than something he can practice. Indeed, his wanderings 'from land to land' (PW 161 586) would make this kind of communal life impracticable. Above all, his desire is founded on faith in God. Yet this God's penance, like everything else in the poem, seems severed from the laws of cause and effect. And we should wonder—as the Mariner does not—about such a God's justice.

In conclusion, Wordsworth claimed that the stress on the supernatural in

both the 'Rime of the Ancient Mariner' and in 'Christabel' pointed to another kind of shortcoming in Coleridge. As recalled by Samuel Rogers, Wordsworth believed that because Coleridge could not write about 'natural woes,' he had to find another topic: 'Not being able to dwell on or sanctify natural woes, he took to the supernatural, and hence his Ancient Mariner and Christabel, in which he shows great poetical power; but these things have not the hold on the heart which nature gives.'⁹ In fact, Wordsworth also 'takes to the supernatural' in 'Tintern Abbey' albeit more obliquely. What he shares with Coleridge is that his desire for the transcendent haunts him by its withdrawal. For both poets the mark of this haunting proves to be language itself. Both poems thus have power that taps into the heart's darker moments—at least as much as its lighter ones.

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⁹ Qtd. in Markham Peacock, ed., *The Critical Opinions of William Wordsworth*, (New York: Octagon, 1969), 222-223.