

Wordsworth's Misery, Coleridge's Woe: Reading "The Thorn"

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OF ALL THE POEMS OF WORDSWORTH that Coleridge cites in the *Biographia Literaria* as suffering from the poet's misguided theorizing, "The Thorn" is especially prominent. When Coleridge begins his specific criticism in chapter 17 he chooses "The Thorn" as his major example, and it is "The Thorn" to which he returns at the end of the chapter. Perhaps the best way to approach the poem is by means of the loose syllogism that if Coleridge's reservations about Wordsworth's poetry arise from his mistrust of the theory espoused by Wordsworth in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, and if "The Thorn" is one of the first poems to come under hand in the *Biographia*, then it makes sense to employ the working hypothesis that the poem strongly exemplifies the mistaken standards of poetry Wordsworth announces in his Preface. In his influential study of the *Lyrical Ballads* Stephen Parrish implicitly relies on that syllogism to propel his argument from *Biographia* to preface to poem. He concludes that Wordsworth's "dramatic method" is a prime source of the differences between Wordsworth and Coleridge, that it is both a central feature of Wordsworth's poetic theory and the most salient characteristic of "The Thorn."¹ Although Parrish's discussion of Wordsworth's dramatic method has been instructive for all students of Wordsworth, in my judgment he both presses too hard his model of the dramatic monologue and fails to pursue far enough his inquiry into the reasons why Coleridge should have objected to the dramatic mode, especially why he should have done so in the course of an argument about poetic diction.

In a recent, suggestive essay W. J. B. Owen has reopened the poem to those issues by delineating an analogy between the narrator's superstition and the operation of the Wordsworthian imagination.

¹ See chapter 3 of Stephen Maxfield Parrish's *The Art of the Lyrical Ballads* (Cambridge, Mass., 1973), pp 80-148

Owen argues that "the superstitious man whom the narrative method of the poem is intended to suggest and define, in so far as his superstition is defined primarily by his obsession with insoluble questions and his resulting uncertainty and his resulting linguistic habits, is an image of Wordsworth's own questioning imagination, which also pursues insoluble questions and receives only uncertain answers."² Owen's reading corrects Geoffrey Hartman's judgment that "'the Thorn' offers . . . a caricature of Wordsworth's own imagination-in-process."³ For Owen "caricature" is much too pejorative, since "what the narrator does parallels what half the poet's mind does"⁴ "The Thorn," then, is not a study of what Parrish calls the "superstitious imagination" but of superstition as an analogue to the poetic imagination.⁵ Owen is persuasive as far as he goes, but he does not account for Coleridge's urgent criticism of the poem. Coleridge's perception of the parallel between poet and narrator would have the effect of producing censure, but parallel alone would not generate the anxiety that Coleridge's criticism betrays.

Coleridge begins judiciously by adapting Southey's earlier stricture against what has come to be called the imitative fallacy "it is not possible," he claims, "to imitate truly a dull and garrulous discourser, without repeating the effects of dullness and garrulity." He goes on generally to "assert that the parts (and these form the far larger portion of the whole) which might as well or still better have proceeded from the poet's own imagination, and have been spoken in his own character, are those which have given, and which will continue to give, universal delight. . . ."⁶ Coleridge enumerates the stanzas, even lines, where the narrator's distinctive manner pulls down the lyric from its proper elevation. Were this all there was to Coleridge's criticism it would be unexceptionable, certainly Wordsworth did not take exception: he made changes in almost every stanza and line to which Coleridge objects. But when Coleridge returns to "The Thorn" at the end of the chapter, the ground rules seem to have changed, he slips the guise of even-tempered critic whose disinterested criterion is "universal delight"

² "The Thorn' and the Poet's Intention," *Wordsworth Circle* 8 (1977) 14

³ Owen, p. 14. Geoffrey Hartman, *Wordsworth's Poetry 1787-1814* (New Haven, 1964), p. 148

⁴ Owen, p. 15

⁵ Parrish, p. 100

⁶ *Biographia Literaria*, ed. J. Shawcross (1907, rpt. Oxford, 1967), 2.36. Southey had written that the "author should have recollected that he who personates tiresome loquacity, becomes tiresome himself" *Critical Review* 24 (October 1798)

It is indeed very possible to adopt in a poem the unmeaning repetitions, habitual phrases and other blank counters, which an unfurnished or confused understanding interposes at short intervals, in order to keep hold of his subject, which is still slipping from him, and to give him time for recollection, or in mere aid of vacancy, as in the scanty companies of a country stage the same player pops backwards and forwards, in order to prevent the appearance of empty spaces, in the procession of *Macbeth* or *Henry VIIIth*. But what assistance to the poet, or ornament to the poem, these can supply, I am at a loss to conjecture.⁷

No longer is the language of "The Thorn" a minor matter of "unpleasant sinkings"⁸, it returns as a more disturbing problem of "unmeaning repetitions, habitual phrases, and other blank counters." Coleridge no longer challenges particular instances where the poet has violated decorum by mixing dictions, he reacts to a language that seems to be no diction at all, that is a concatenation of words which eludes and, by eluding, subverts the very principle of decorum. The difference between Coleridge's two responses can be gauged by marking the slippage in his use of a dramatic analogue. When Coleridge first discusses the poem he reluctantly concedes that perhaps in extraordinary instances, such as the nurse's speech in *Romeo and Juliet*, dramatic poetry may allow limited imitation of a dull and garrulous speaker—a concession, however, aimed both at reaffirming that Wordsworth is inherently a lyric poet and at attaching the rider that even if he were a dramatic poet and "The Thorn" a dramatic poem his practice in this case would be unsound. When, however, Coleridge resorts to a dramatic analogue at the end of the chapter, he employs it not for the purpose of generic distinction but as corroborative simile instead of distinguishing "The Thorn" from a Shakespearean play, he likens its narration to the performance of Shakespeare in a country theatre. Simile and shift are telling. The sight of the poor player popping back and forth across the stage not only displays the material poverty of rural theatre, it *enacts* a mimetic paradox: the mechanic's enthusiastic but crude attempt "to prevent the appearance of empty spaces" calls attention to the illusion of the very dramatic continuity he would maintain, figures the vacancy he would suppress. The cultivated theatergoer, fully capable of suspending his disbelief in the stage artifice to which he has been habituated, is forced by the rustic's bumptious theatricalism to divide his mind between the illusion he would willingly accept and the mechanical

⁷ *Biographia*, 2, 42-43

⁸ *Biographia*, 2, 38

promotion of that illusion, which constantly exposes the wires that permit belief to be suspended. What troubles the cultivated is to discover the bold sophistication of innocence, a self-reflexivity that has already infiltrated the supposedly naive propriety of mimesis. If we substitute for the popping player, neither man nor character, the blank counter, neither wholly insignificant nor fully meaningful, we see that the force of Coleridge's simile is to describe "The Thorn" as neither conventionally lyric nor dramatic but as theatre of the mind—and a particular kind of mental theatre that reflects its own workings, comments upon the conditions of its operation, and enacts the fiction of its continuity. Whereas the license of the rustic submits to conjecture (since his eccentricity is a function of performance and not the intention of the playwright and since, moreover, it can ultimately be subsumed within the *telos* of dramatic convention) in Wordsworth's poem, because it is its own performance, because what is enacted is the act of the poet, the unmeaning repetitions cannot be recuperated, even conjecturally, by any of the conventions of use or ornament.

If Coleridge's repeated recourse to a dramatic analogue invites us to suspect his claim that "The Thorn" is a lyric, his insistence should caution us to take seriously the distance between Wordsworth's poem and any conventional dramatic form which presumes the representation by an autonomous author of a distinct character or characters through action or utterance. Although he may be equivocating, Coleridge is nonetheless on target when he exploits Wordsworth's note as an all but explicit acknowledgment that he has portrayed no character in "The Thorn." Indeed, Coleridge remains Wordsworth's best critic because his equivocations—sometimes sly, often anxious, occasionally spasmodic—encounter Wordsworth's own. In this case the telltale slippage in Coleridge's use of lyrical criteria and dramatic analogues adumbrates a conception of "The Thorn" as a generic vagrant, neither lyric nor drama and both at once. As Frances Ferguson puts it in a shrewd comment on the poem: "The project of poetic imitation becomes an attempt to trace the motions of the human mind. But it is especially curious . . . to recognize that dramatic characterization becomes peripheral in the very process of depicting the human mind. The narrator of "The Thorn" exists less as a character than as a characteristic way of talking, he is almost an embodiment of the figure of repetition."⁹ The speaker of "The Thorn" is not a character from the mind, his speech represents the characters

⁹ *Wordsworth Language as Counter-Spirit* (New Haven, 1977), p. 13

of the mind—characters that are proper to no man or experience, characters in a lyrical drama that, as Coleridge witnesses, baffle conjecture as they combine to prefabricate the certainties by which we know and on which we go

The mental theatre of "The Thorn" conforms to and illuminates the dramatic method that Wordsworth proposes in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, where he forecasts a kind of drama in which "it will be the wish of the poet to bring his feelings near to those of the persons whose feelings he describes, nay, for short spaces of time to let himself slip into an entire delusion, and even confound and identify his feelings with theirs."¹⁰ This is no poetry of experience in the conventional sense. The experience Wordsworth describes is more of an *emfabling* than an *emfubling*—the poet slips into a delusion rather than creates an illusion—a species of identification felt as confoundment, not participation. Moreover, the poet whom Wordsworth envisages has no "vantage-ground" from which to nicely calibrate and control the interaction of sympathy and judgment, he shows no inclination to plot ploy and pitfall.¹¹ All that restricts the poet in his composition is his aim of "modifying . . . the language which is thus suggested to him, by a consideration that he describes for a particular purpose, that of giving pleasure." Thus, although the poet partakes of the "freedom and power of real and substantial action and suffering," that action and suffering must be altered in its translation to poetry.¹² There is, then, to be neither coincidence nor parallel between experience of poet and experience of reader. Freedom and power eclipse sympathy and judgment, the dim lights of experience, the only condition the poet heeds, willingly suffers, is the giving of pleasure to the reader.

Were it the poet's intent in "The Thorn" to stage manage sympathy and judgment, we might expect that the interlocutor in the poem, conventional surrogate for the reader, would furnish cues as to the shape of that sympathy, the standards of that judgment (as he does, for example, in "The Ruined Cottage"), but instead the interlocutor's intermittent questions consistently reflect his baffled inability to grasp what it is he is being told.¹³ If these questions are cues they

¹⁰ Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1802) in *Lyrical Ballads 1798*, ed W J B Owen (Oxford, 1969), p 166. References to "The Thorn" are to this edition, cited hereafter by line in my text.

¹¹ Coleridge uses "vantage-ground" to name the "prerequisite" for the "human soul to prosper in rustic life" (*Biographia* 2:32).

¹² *Lyrical Ballads*, p 166.

¹³ The interlocutor has received scant attention from recent critics. This is true not only of Parrish, Owen, and Hartman but also of Paul D. Sheats' discussion of

are very peculiar, for the frequent versions of "wherefore" press for answers while evading inference. By insistently applying the standard of the understanding, the interlocutor inhibits the movement of a discourse that flows toward other channels. In the interlocutor we have dramatized a mind eager to be given something to cling to, some reference point in the narrative, and in that respect he triangulates with the reader, who knows not where to refer, and the narrator, whose tale, if it is about anything, is about reference. The development of that triangulation gradually distances the reader from the interlocutor, who, because he does not seem to be able to advance or withdraw from his rational interrogatives, conveys something like a judgment on that cast of mind which would persist in its judicious questions, hang on reasons. By the end of the poem the reader feels confident that the interlocutor is missing the point, even though he may not be entirely sure what the point is. We might call the interlocutor Coleridgean in as much as the one puts the same kind of questions to the narrator of the poem as the other puts to the poet, they both display conjecture at a loss.

Every turn we take with the poem suggests not the manipulation of monologist by dramatist but an analogy between poet and narrator. The analogy probably needs no other justification besides the fact that one does keep coming back to it, but others are forthcoming. In his essay Owen supplies a thematic parallel based on the well-known biographical detail of Wordsworth's discovery of a surprisingly impressive thorn during a walk in the mountains.¹⁴ This parallel leads Owen to describe the analogy between narrator and poet in terms of a troubling, not quite explicable sense of significance: "the narrator says something significant happened here, but I do not know with certainty how it happened, the poet says I feel some significance here, but I do not know what it is."¹⁵ Other parallels can also be adduced. The narrator shares with Wordsworth a fascination for that state in which "the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature."¹⁶ Regarded as the sub-

the poem in his *The Making of Wordsworth's Poetry, 1785-1798* (Cambridge, Mass., 1973), pp 199-202, and Mary Jacobus' study in *Tradition and Experiment in Wordsworth's "Lyrical Ballads" 1798* (Oxford, 1976), pp 140-50

¹⁴ "Alfoxden, 1798 Arose out of my observing, on the ridge of Quantock Hill, on a stormy day a thorn which I had often passed in calm and bright weather without noticing it I said to myself, 'Cannot I by some invention do as much to make this Thorn prominently an impressive object as the storm has made it to my eyes at this moment.' I began the poem accordingly and composed it with great rapidity" (*Lyrical Ballads*, 138-39)

¹⁵ Owen, p 14

¹⁶ *Lyrical Ballads*, p 156

ject of Wordsworth's interest, the narrator displays passions which are nearly incorporate with his natural surroundings, regarded as teller of a story, the narrator tends toward subjects that literalize incorporation Martha Ray is mistaken for a crag (or *vice versa*), the child is incorporate in the spot that the mad mother visits. Another prominent aspect of the poetic program Wordsworth proclaims in his Preface is his intention to counteract the general and "degrading thirst for outrageous stimulation" by attempting to enlarge the capability of the human mind to be "excited without the application of gross and violent stimulants."¹⁷ And despite some sensational embellishments the tendency of the narrator of "The Thorn" is similarly to enlarge that capability by venting his own excitement at the least perceptible stimulation and by encouraging that capability in his interlocutor¹⁸ There is violence in the poem, but it is as much violence to explain excitement as it is violence that produces excitement Indeed, a narrative pattern is established in which overt stimulation seems to follow its apparent effect. the narrator does not tell of his first encounter with Martha Ray, for example, until stanzas 17-19, well after he has supplied ample testimony of his powerful response to the scene she is supposed to have originally invested with passion. Wordsworth's note glosses the narrator's strange subtlety

Superstitious men are almost always men of slow faculties and deep feelings, their minds are not loose, but adhesive, they have a reasonable share of imagination, by which word I mean the faculty which produces impressive effects out of simple elements, but they are utterly destitute of fancy, the power by which pleasure and surprise are excited by sudden varieties of situation and by accumulated imagery.¹⁹

The superstitious narrator produces impressive effects out of simple elements as does the imaginative Wordsworth in his representation of the simple movements of the narrator's mind. Finally, Wordsworth's claim to poetic authority, that he has "at all times endeavoured to look steadily at [his] subject," could be justly echoed by this narrator, whose gaze is steady to the point of pathology.²⁰ The narrator, like the Wordsworth of the Preface, attests to a relation between the steadiness of gaze and the excitement that can be obtained from small,

¹⁷ *Lyrical Ballads*, p. 160

¹⁸ In her *Tradition and Experiment* Jacobus remarks on the way "Wordsworth plays down the gothicism of his source [in William Taylor's translation of Burger's "The Lass of Fair Wone"] by transferring it to an everyday setting" (243)

¹⁹ *Lyrical Ballads*, p. 139

²⁰ *Lyrical Ballads*, p. 161

almost imperceptible stimulants when, in stanza 21, he remarks, "Some say, if to the pond you go, / And fix on it a steady view, / The shadow of a babe you trace . . ." Whether or not the narrator has himself thus viewed the pond, or whether anyone has actually so stated, so gazed, is less important than the fact that he dramatizes a Wordsworthian scene and with a Wordsworthian tact

If the analogy between poet and narrator does eventually break down, it is because a pressure towards complete congruence forbids us to treat them as parallel, as poet *and* narrator. If we follow what Wordsworth calls in his note the "turns of passion" between the two figures, we find that they are "always different, yet not palpably different"²¹ Analogy or incorporation can only be imposed on the poem by hypostatizing the slippery difference that unsettles such logic at every turn. Wordsworth claims to identify his feelings with his characters, characters whom he chooses because their feelings are incorporated with the forms of nature. Poet slips into character slipping into nature. The logical consequence would be a corporate entity, the fixed image of man not *and* but *in* nature, or, to adapt the imagery of the poem, the fascinating discovery of self in a mountain pool—the kind of corporate entity which Coleridge decries in his criticism of the "Immortality Ode"²² But that level of incorporation, though imagined, is never reached in the tale itself—one traces in the pool a child's face—nor in the telling. the narrator's slowness of mind is countered by an amiable inventiveness that modifies identification towards pleasure. Analogy collapses, confounding, identification, and incorporation are indulged only to a point.

Wordsworth's note to the poem gives us an idea of what that point is and how it is reached. There Wordsworth supplies a justification for his style, which is necessarily a justification of the repetitiousness of his speaker and, consequently, a gloss on the poem:

Now every man must know that an attempt is rarely made to communicate impassioned feelings without something of an accompanying consciousness of the inadequateness of our own powers, or the deficiencies of language. During such efforts there will be a craving in the mind, and as long as it is unsatisfied the speaker will cling to the same words, or words of the same character. There are also various other reasons why repetition and apparent tautology are frequently beauties of the highest kind. Among the chief of these reasons is the interest which the mind attaches to words, not only as symbols of the passion, but as *things*,

²¹ *Lyrical Ballads*, p. 139

²² Cf *Biographia*, 2 111-13

active and efficient, which are of themselves part of the passion. And further, from a spirit of fondness, exultation, and gratitude, the mind luxuriates in the repetition of words which appear successfully to communicate its feelings²³

The "craving" Wordsworth mentions is evident in the first five stanzas of the poem, where the narrator attempts to describe the spot that so fascinates him. He begins with the statement "There is a thorn"—a stark, matter of fact declaration, but in "The Thorn," as we learn, matters of fact are also matters for desire. "Looks," "stands," "has"—each subsequent representation of the thorn that varies from mere proposition of existence implies existence as a figure subject to description and interpretation. The thorn impersonates a passion which clings to it in the very margin of its manifestation, as if manifestation were itself provocation to the perceiver, mark of and incitement to a passion for which existence is merely the pretext. In "The Thorn" existence cannot be distinguished from passionate manifestation, or, to put it more precisely, existence is distinguished *as* passionate manifestation. That the thorn's impersonations are inadequate to communicate the passion it represents is itself represented not only in their variability but also in the narrator's repeated attempts to fix the thorn in a conceptual order, he cravingly describes it as variously old and young, erect and knotted, organic and inorganic—communicating not what he sees but his craving to see it as something. In this first section of the poem propositions, aspects, and postures accrete and clash to the point that it becomes tempting to interpret the moss that overgrows the thorn as native allegory of the "plain and manifest intent" of the thorn's representations to bury "this thorn" forever.²⁴ Burial is prevented only by the partial satisfaction of the narrator's craving through his talismanic repetition of "this thorn," the verbal thing which, if it is not adequate to communicate fully the passions attached to the thorn, is adequate as iconic representation of the craving for such a communication.

Martha Ray first appears in the poem in stanza 6 as another representation of the thorn propagated by an obliging association of ideas. But the woman has an authority that all the other impersonations lack, her appearance condenses all the shifting, anxious passion in the poem because she is herself a figure of passion and propagation. She

²³ *Lyrical Ballads*, pp 140–41

²⁴ To call this trope the narrator's personification as does Sheats (198) is to flatten the figurative dynamics of a poem where to all appearances the world seems to impersonate before the mind personifies

can at one and the same time be taken as cause and effect of the impressiveness of the thorn, whose peculiar significance is aptly figured by the dislocation of the spot by this woman, who, curiously, seems both less and more than fully there. This figure exploits the strain of the thorn's overdetermination by troping significance as the disparity between the woman's vocal passion and the mute place that evokes it. That disparity, the wrench of significance, is perfectly expressed in the woman's "oh misery," a cry which in turn relieves the anxiety of the narrator's craving for the right words to express the eccentric passion that has impelled him into utterance. When he repeats the cry it is not, therefore, to inform or condole but to exult in the phrase itself, the thing that has settled an otherwise homeless passion. To be exact, Martha Ray's pain is the narrator's pleasure. But of course her pain is not really *her* pain—it is, I suspect, Parrish's sense that such is the case that encouraged him to conclude that the woman does not actually exist.²⁵ The woman exists necessarily as a representation of the narrative anxiety for an adequate sign that has structured the associative movement of the poem. Her pained cry is the narrator's lyric pain sufficiently modified in the representation, given sufficient dramatic otherness, that it provides the necessary overbalance of pleasure.

The movement of the narrator's mind toward exultation can be elucidated by reference to the Lockean psychology that informs the poem. When, in the revised version of his *Essay on Human Understanding*, Locke asks "what is it that determines the will in regard to our actions," his answer is "some . . . *uneasiness* a man is at present under. . . . This uneasiness we may call, as it is, *desire*."²⁶ Desire is an uneasiness for an absent good, but that absent good is only conceived as an object of desire as it promises to relieve pain. Although Locke has begun his discussion of motivation by proposing the radical substitution of the psychological polarity of pleasure and pain for the metaphysical antithesis of good and evil, as he pursues his investigation it becomes clear that what makes uneasiness truly uneasy is that pleasure and pain have no independent status or positivity, they function conceptually as differentials to explain the dynamics of a constant desire. Uneasiness is not opposed to either pleasure or pain but to ease, and reading Locke it makes both structural and psychological sense to infer that as man's single abiding goal is to

²⁵ Parrish, p. 100

²⁶ John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Alexander Campbell Fraser (1894, rpt. New York, 1959), 1:332–33

escape uneasiness, should either pleasure *or* pain present itself to the mind as pure and stable refuge, so would that state become an object of desire. Locke does not himself make that inference, but he shows the way. His answer to "What is it moves desire?" may be "happiness, and that alone," but when he continues, "Happiness and misery are the name of two extremes, the utmost bounds whereof we know not, it is what 'eye hath not seen, ear hath not heard, nor hath it entered into the heart of man to conceive,'" he presumes an equivalence between the two inconceivable extremes.²⁷

Locke's extremes meet in "The Thorn." There, as we have seen, narrative craving is the manifestation of an uneasiness caused by the incapacity of language to communicate passion. The narrator escapes repeating the same dull round of anxiety when he discovers the extremity of pain in the woman's moan "oh misery". the woman is her cry, her cry is absolute, perdurable pain. The narrator escapes not into her passion nor through her passion but *by* her passion, which in the extremity of its torment has nothing of desire about it and excites nothing of desire or surmise in the narrator, whose passion is not fanned, not purged, but completed by the woman's cry. The perfection of the woman's pain is the perfection of her otherness—more perfect than actuality ever permits, than ethics can master—an otherness so perfect that it limns an elegant antithetical rapport between extremes. Uneasiness can find its ease in the conception of either misery or happiness, and within the ontological emptiness of that ease the plenum of misery can satisfactorily cohabit with the presence of happiness. Epistemologically, the narrator's eye hath seen, his ear hath heard, because his heart hath fully conceived the utmost that the Lockean model allows and more than Locke himself could imagine. Ethically, if utter misery is indeed present as pure extreme, there is no way for the narrator to participate in it, nor any way for him to sympathize with it, for the conception of true misery allows no room for the desire that participation and sympathy indulge; it is at once utterly full and utterlessly blank. When the narrator puts another "oh misery" after the first, he gratefully stays with the woman in the exultation of repetition, which is synonymy with a saving difference. In its faithful adherence to the voice of misery the narrator's "mind luxuriates in the repetition of words which appear successfully to communicate its feelings." Having read Coleridge, we can observe that Wordsworth's usage of "appear," which hovers between the transitive "manifest" and the intransitive "seem,"

²⁷ *Essay*, 1:340

duplicates, perhaps ordains, Coleridge's own usage in his description of the country player's attempt "to prevent the appearance of empty spaces" In "The Thorn," as preface writer and critic uneasily collaborate to suggest, the appearance of emptiness is prevented by the "oh misery," which appears to communicate feeling successfully—the cry of pain a blank counter which the assiduously imaginative mind invents (finds/fabricates) and pleasurably repeats in order to dramatize and thus communicate a difference it cannot understand

The narrator's communication does not appear to succeed with the interlocutor, whose insistent, edgy "wherefores" in stanza 8 worry pain into consequence and summon narrative as the faithful slave of a mastering understanding. His anxious queries shove the narrator from the spot where in his mind he has arrived and where in his gratitude he is inclined to luxuriate, they propel him down the path of plausibility Each "wherefore" analyzes the narrator's condensed emblem into discrete agents and actions that may then be sorted into the appropriate conjugations of causes and effects which should, in happy eventuality, fully explain Martha Ray's strange behavior and particularly her repeated "doleful cry"—an account which would be the same thing as an explanation of the narrator's introduction of Martha Ray into his description and his repetition of her doleful cry As in "We Are Seven," the implied question, "Can you explain what happened to her (or them)?" conveys the hidden and more explosive charge of its reverse: "Can what happened to her (or them) explain you?" As in the shorter poem, the analytic insistence of the idiot questioner has the effect of making the nervous need for reasons, for some single explanation, seem more superstitious than the credulity of the speaker.

The narrator of "The Thorn" is as genially resilient as he is stubbornly adhesive, however, and in responding to the interlocutor's demand for motives and history he, unlike the child of "We Are Seven," opens his narrative to the circulation of signs of space and time, as well as the testimony of other minds. Although he warns darkly that there are some things he "cannot tell" (l. 89), he does give his listener the "best help" (l. 111) he can. He modifies the language of freedom and power to pleasure the understanding. first, he relates all the provocative details of Martha Ray's pathetic history as he has gathered them here and there, then, in the face of the insufficiency of that gossip to firmly bind her to the thorn, he recounts his own climb to "the mountain's height" (l. 185).

The narrator's tale (stanzas 17–19) has puzzled critics as much as it baffles the interlocutor. As autobiography it is characteristically

Wordsworthian in that memory retrieves a story that ambiguously mixes event and allegory in such a way that priority becomes obscure. Critics have been inclined to regard the event as prior, however, and to refer to this incident on the heights as the original experience, the seed from which the rest of the narrative germinated and bloomed in the mind of the ingenuous narrator. Any allegorical or parodistic elements are ascribed to the manipulation of the poet or the eye of the critic. Given such an approach, the question of the actuality of Martha Ray has major importance as a key to the teller's psychology—a key planted for the clever reader to put to use. Such condescension to the narrator mistakes his tale, however, and for two reasons. The first problem is sequence. The associative digression that connects the beginning of "The Thorn" with its close dictates a rigorously chronological reading which observes starts and stops but not origins and ends. The poem starts with the proposition "There is a thorn." Everything in the poem follows that proposition. Every story in the poem explains the significance of that proposition, every explanation of significance in "The Thorn" is a story. We may indeed doubt the existence of Martha Ray because we may doubt the existence of everything in a poem in which existence is the pretext for a variety of representations from clinging moss and scarlet cloak to an autobiographical narrative that both demonstrates and glosses the dynamics of passionate representation. The narrator's remembered incident is a story that appears to explain appearances, a tale that is the allegory of its telling. Condescension toward the teller also should be forestalled by Coleridge's theatrical simile, which nervously supposes that such dancing complications are neither beyond nor above even the most lowly performer. In his ardent conventional wisdom, the performer may concoct a sophistication that both perplexes the orders of high and low, action and imitation, and baffles as well every attempt to impute or deny intention. When the narrator recounts the incident on the mountain we recognize it as original because we've seen it before. If pressed to tell all, passion will parade its origin in the types of the understanding. The mind does have mountains, and the inventiveness of passion is to exploit whatever blank counter/epiphany is at hand.

The incident is what one would wish. The narrator tells how he set out, proud in the powers of his instrumented eye, to ascend to a prospect where observation might, with extensive view, survey the patient ocean, "wide and bright," tranquil as a summer's sea, before it. That hope plots toward the confusing rain which may be its frustration but is the gratification of our sense of an allegorical coher-

ence: vaunting aspiration followed by physical blinding commands the moral and psychological correspondents of humiliation and the dissolution of a presumed mastery and self-possession. Lost, exposed, buffeted, the climber/narrator must restore an equilibrium with the world outside, the nature which he had assumed was an unresisting patient but which seems to have become a malevolent agent. Though his naive confidence in his mastery be lost—it does no good to be master of all one sees if one is blind—the climber must recover the integrity of self sufficient to a sadder but wiser human nature. The means of settling with nature is the same as satisfying the self: inventing a figure that impersonates nature and reflects the self's inalienable integrity. Whether or not Martha Ray actually exists, it is necessary that she be found on the mountaintop. The last and almost successful invention of the desperate I is a moment of redemptive narcissism on the height of darkness: “as I am a man,” swears the narrator, “I found / A woman seated on the ground.” Adam's dream is the first and altogether necessary invention in which he embodies his self through the provocative image of an endlessly fertile Other: “I saw her face, / Her face it was enough for me.” Such is the consequence of this plot: the face that is enough for me, the me that at its physical height had plummeted into the psychic deep, the me that re-forms its self in its encounter with the woman's form. The narrator's story recollects the investigator's loss of his lens and the pilgrim's discovery of a mirror—a conventional plot of and about necessary connections. To doubt the reality of Martha Ray is to doubt the reality of the observer himself (as he is a man he found a woman), to accept the invention of one is to entail the invention of the other—in sum, to acknowledge, if not fully understand, the invention of the incident itself.

I suggest that the reader courts futility if he seeks an explanation of the thorn's curious power in this sublime scene. On the contrary, one needs to explain the stormy confrontation by the thorn—or, more precisely, to explain the incident by the narrator's desire to explain the thorn. The very plausibility of the tale testifies to its flattery of the understanding, at once incident and epitome, the account is as marvelously responsive to the interpretive needs of a reader or listener lost in the mist of narration as is the appearance of the woman to the psychic needs of the bewildered climber. This story, the story we expect to hear, is enough for “me.”

But still not enough for the passion stimulated by the thorn, passion which ignores the ego's conservative economics, exhausts the worn paraphernalia of the sublime, and exceeds all mere experience,

epiphanic or otherwise. The sign and instance of that excess is the cry "oh misery," which emerges not in the climber's path but in his turn. If the face was enough, the cry that hinges the turn away from the face is more than enough, the romantic excess that disturbs the serene equilibrium of romantic reflection. The "oh misery" is the cry of deviation without origin in face or wind, a cry which does not belong to man, woman, or storm, its excess is the dramatic incapacity of experience to explain passion, and thus it appears to successfully communicate the narrator's feelings for the thorn.

Nothing follows from this unplotted cry—or nothing would follow if meaningless vacancy were not prevented by one of those "ands" which pop about in the narrator's mental theatre and which here coordinates "oh misery" into the narrative flow. Any inferences that a prudent conjecture might have woven from the recollected threads of experience are unraveled by the "And there she sits," which betrays understanding's tactics to a narrative parataxis that precisely deconstructs the explanatory pretense of what is being told by exculpating the "misery" from either cause or consequence. "And there she sits" links, without the decorous bother of equation or subordination, the mountaintop epiphany with the most humble pathos, gently sponsors a restaging of the scene where misery appears—now not as a crisis of the romantic sublime but as an everyday difference past sublimation.

And when the little breezes make
The waters of the pond to shake,
As all the country know,
She shudders, and you hear her cry,
"Oh misery! oh misery!"

Another "and" prospects another tableau which appears not to reflect the narrator's feeling for the thorn but to coordinate it with the fluid edge where the heavy tides of the human heart gently link with the barely perceptible vacillations of nature, a tableau that is ultimately another pretext for the repetition of that luxuriously unmeaning phrase.

For the interlocutor, however, the more than enough of misery is decidedly too much. He attempts to recall the narrator to his subject and chasten his eccentric pleasure by his questions "But what's the thorn? and what's the pond?" which insist on the orderly subordination of all appearances to the reality of the woman, the only figure in the narrative who, it seems, can relate its disparate elements and

thereby subject passion to significance Martha Ray is not simply a face, or even a voice, she is also a mother. In propagating further significance for her, the narrator reveals she is significant because of her propagation. And the significance of propagation is tied to death. In "The Thorn" the problematic meaning of things is connected, as if by a subterranean association, with the death of a child. That passion will incorporate itself with the forms of nature can be explained only by an infant's death. The question "What the thorn" divulges the connection, latent but indelible in Wordsworth, between "There is a thorn" and "There was a boy"—a passionate link between manifestation and memory. Born passion's child, buried the child becomes passion's father. The murder of the innocent is the sacrifice that explains and legitimates the sense of the sacred or, in this case, the uncanny that abides in a special spot. Father of passion, the buried child is the pure author whose works presume his death, a death that is the seal of an original, uncontaminated authority which endows with an inalienable meaning the power of the spot.²⁸ The paths of meaning lead but to the grave—such might be the doctrine of the more lurid parts of "Salisbury Plain" or even *The Prelude*. And in "The Thorn" the narrator conducts the interlocutor down those paths, but to no certain end, for here the association of meaning with sacrifice is invoked as the final explanation in a scene that jests with final explanations. Instead of producing the secret original author sufficient to the passionate representations of his tale, the narrator reflects in his account the promiscuity of the imagination that he has all along indulged. At the same time his story dramatizes the true character of and the irrevocable limits to the speculator's ambition of a final meaning. Instead of condensing passionate representations into a single source, the narrator's hearsay account begins with the supposition of burial in stanza 20 only to disperse the marks of death and burial over the field of passion in an enigmatic script that stimulates rather than quiets the imagination. The thorn marks not an indivisible spot but an open site of desire of which the invention of the dead child is the *genus disloci*.

To learn the meaning of the mother's cry and thereby determine the final cause of the narrator's garrulous tale would be to find the buried child, the search for that meaning appears as another version

²⁸ Two recent studies of Wordsworth admirably elucidate the relation of death and meaning in Wordsworth's poetry. See Thomas Weiskel's *The Romantic Sublime* (Baltimore, 1976), pp. 175-86, and Ferguson, particularly chapter 5. I would also like to acknowledge the influence of Neil Hertz on my argument here.

of the encounter with the sufficient face Looking for the child is the same act as looking into the pool for one's own reflection looking for the source which would make sense out of a world of disorienting suggestive differences is looking for an image that would affirm by reflection the integrity of the self In looking for himself "someone" finds the face of a baby Are we to understand that the baby's face is the reflection of him who fixes his gaze on the pond in an infantile desire to fix the meaning of the spot? Or are we to understand that the shadow is the mind's wishful projection of that which it desires to find? Or are we to understand this superstitious hearsay literally? Regardless of how we choose to understand this reflection, it bemuses that understanding, as the pond bemuses the searcher's steady view, the narrator dramatizes a recognition scene that will always fall short of sufficient knowledge the investigator's gaze discovers, in the place where his "own" reflection should be, the image of a dead child, an image, however, that does not even reflect his look but which, on the contrary, seems to make his look the reflection of a gaze already there—as if the fond image of his desire is always already desiring him It is as if you trace in the pool a glance that makes you a reflection, your self the character in a specular play long since wrought, your peculiar place merely the prevention of the appearance of empty spaces It is as if the dead child is father of the anxious man. This dramatic exchange of looks in stanza 21 both images the mind's dogged ambition to face, finally, a meaning sufficient to its own wish for integrity as thoroughly narcissistic and limns the delicate difference—a trace, a glancing shadow—that teases that yearning for incorporation out of its gratification This is the same waver, perhaps the effect of the same creeping breeze, that thwarted the spades of those righteous literalists who sought to settle the indefinite by unearthing "the little infant's bones" and bring the mother to "public justice" (11 134, 133). It is, we may agree, the same uncanny flux that characterizes the mental theatre of the narrator and that frustrates the conjecture of the interlocutor, who may find in the narrator's ravel not the answer he seeks but the pattern of his seeking. The interlocutor's insistent "wherefores" do not coerce the narrator into a final, false revelation of meeting He still cannot tell the what of the thorn, the why of the woman, or the how of the place; but in the last stanza he does tell the counters of the spot again, the fixities and definites which in their telling toll the pleasure of narrative. Repetition carries the narrator to the luxury of a language which successfully communicates its own passionate insuffi-

ciency, which exults in its own flux, and which recognizes its return to "misery" as the condition of its freedom and power

In the middle of chapter 17 of the *Biographia*, Coleridge, in the course of responding to Wordsworth's misguided *dicta* and while groping for a way to reconcile Wordsworth to the dictates of the true Wordsworthian genius, momentarily concentrates his criticism and crystallizes his objections to Wordsworth's rusticated diction. "The best part of human language, properly so called," he writes, "is derived from reflections on the acts of the mind itself. It is formed by a voluntary appropriation of fixed symbols to internal acts, to processes and results of imagination, the greater part of which have no place in the consciousness of uneducated man."²⁹ The word that confers on this assertion its authority is "properly," which along with its variations, is the standard of value that Coleridge would substitute for Wordsworth's ill-favored, equivocal "real." The "proper" is the prejudice of Coleridge's philosophical criticism, it is the matrix that constitutes property and regulates propriety, the twin criteria of excellence that Coleridge develops in his first engagement with "The Thorn" and later deploys in his assault on Wordsworth's theory of poetic diction. But the stories that Coleridge tells himself to explain Wordsworth's strange utterances are no more satisfactory than the stories the narrator tells the interlocutor to explain "There is a thorn." The evidence of that futility is the example of Coleridge's return. His renewed, indeed heightened, objections at the end of the chapter match the final bafflement of the interlocutor and admit the incapacity of Coleridge's concentration to properly place the Wordsworthian error. What makes "The Thorn" such a woefully unsettling poem for Coleridge is that it is a "place" where the best part of human language startlingly encounters the worst and cannot help but acknowledge a likeness. In this poem, a mental theatre where nothing is "properly so called," the "unmeaning repetitions, habitual phrases, and other blank counters" are those parts of language which represent, and represent with complete success, the passionate reflection of the mind itself. The poet adopts a narrator, the narrator tells a tale—the mind of each appropriates symbols for its internal acts, but in so doing each carelessly relinquishes the pretense of the proper which the notions of the "voluntary" and the "fixed" presume. In reflecting on itself the mind of the poet and the narrator each finds that his subject is still slipping from him, and neither can maintain

²⁹ *Biographia*, 2, 39–40

any "vantage-ground"—indeed, any "safe ground" at all—which can be respectably cultivated.³⁰ All that the quicksilver medium of the mind has (not owns) are blank counters which, though neither useful nor ornamental, mark its slippage and represent a passion without property or propriety.

Wordsworth's theory reinscribes the voluntary as that indefinite velleity which, withheld from the delusion of complete identification, modifies the action sufficiently to permit the reader's pleasure. In Wordsworth's poem that pleasuring velleity is the significant stirring in language induced by metre, by metaphor, or by repetition—a "creeping breeze." When Coleridge objects to Wordsworth's method he does not merely respond to the analogy between poet and superstitious narrator, disquieting though that be, he reacts to the threat of an analogy which, when read through, undermines the very premises which legitimate analogical thought: ultimately the consciousness of the uneducated man is like the poet's only because neither has a place of its own; neither will adhere to a spot given or ordained in analogy's supposedly comprehensive network. Coleridge fails in his romantic attempt to impose on Wordsworth "an index expurgatorius of certain well known and ever returning phrases, both in introductory, and transitional. . . ."³¹ Instead he identifies a mental theatre that has no self-evident author or direction—identifies and, crucially, re-presents: as the poet has adopted a narrator, the critic has adopted an interlocutor, one whose queries are the unlikely vehicle for the imagination's strange success.

³⁰ For examples, see his comments on "the vantage-ground" of "education or original sensibility" required for the prosperity of the human soul, on the "common properties" of class which mark every man's language, and on the "property of passion" (*Biographia* 2 33, 41, 42)

³¹ *Biographia*, 1 5

