

Innocence and Experience In Wordsworth's "The Thorn"

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FOR a fresh look at this poem,¹ one of the lyrical ballads, Albert Gérard's detailed examination of it in his recent *English Romantic Poetry*² is the best starting-point. He locates the sources of difficulty, which are mainly in the structure, identifies what is most sensible in previous commentaries, and then himself presents a careful, sensitive exposition of the poem. Much of it seems to me unexceptionable — in particular his analysis of the narrator's role is altogether convincing — and except where it is unavoidable I see no point in going over the same ground. My reason for re-opening discussion is that, solving most of the poem's formal problems, his essay nevertheless does not follow through some of its insights and fails completely to notice one dimension of meaning, assimilation of which I believe is crucial for a comprehensive interpretation and balanced estimate of the poem.

Wordsworth in the Fenwick note insists that observing the thorn on a stormy day was the primary occasion of the poem: "I said to myself, 'Cannot I by some invention do as much to make this Thorn permanently as an impressive object as the storm has made it to my eyes at this moment.'"³ This is an interesting and no doubt accurate description of the poet's thought-processes, and yet it is possible to be led by an outmoded critical vocabulary to mistake the character of the poem, for certainly it is not *about* a thorn. As Gérard says, the tree is "a living natural metaphor for something human."⁴ The same is true of those natural features grouped with the thorn and given

similar emphasis. Clearly what happened was this: the obscurely "impressive" scene raised to consciousness and focussed certain associated images and feelings; thus, although the story of the deserted mother could be termed an "invention," the meanings latent in it were, rather, the *discoveries* of introspection.

Since the poem is centred on human qualities and human experience, for which the natural forms provide analogies, we might begin not at the beginning but by considering first the story of Martha Ray. I agree with Gérard that in "The Thorn" Wordsworth's "theme was the fallen condition of man."⁵ The statement applies to a large number of his poems, but, it is more relevant to note, the theme is a frequent one in his contributions to *Lyrical Ballads* — for instance, in "Lines left upon a Seat in a Yew-tree . . ." and "Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey." I would be more specific and say that "The Thorn," like "The Idiot Boy," is about the conditions of innocence and experience and the manner of their connection. The account of Martha Ray's maidenhood, her betrothal to Stephen Hill and his abandonment of her, her pregnancy and the rumoured death of the child and her continuous mental suffering after that, is a fable of man's fall from the state of psychical and social concord enjoyed in childhood and youth and his initiation into the pains of adult living.

Full twenty years are past and gone
 Since she (her name is Martha Ray)
 Gave with a maiden's true good-will
 Her company to Stephen Hill . . .

The sparseness and impersonality of balladic narrative convention help to accentuate the structure of fable in this history; but here, further, the moral wholesomeness of conventional folk language ("she . . . Gave with a maiden's true good-will/Her company to Stephen Hill") contributes the appropriate style to a description of emotional innocence. The poem goes on to associate this state of innocence with the years of the individual's absorption in the family circle and with a social life that makes no contacts

outside the tightly integrated community of "friends and kindred." (It is appropriate that during Martha's later exile from this state these should be replaced by hostile villagers.) The choice of marriage partner in this situation is an important event in the life both of the individual and the community; therefore the coincidence of personal and group sentiment concerning Stephen Hill rounds off Wordsworth's picture of a prelapsarian order.

Stephen, however, is the disharmonious element; his betrayal of the love that maintains this order parallels the act which precipitates the mythical fall of Judaic and Christian tradition. The Romantic's non-mythical conception of this state of being, of course, diverges sharply from the religious tradition, but in the lines recording Stephen's faithlessness there is a particularly interesting variation. He had been two-timing Martha and on the very day appointed for their wedding had married "another Maid," for which action he is branded by the poet as "unthinking Stephen." The epithet will seem feeble unless it is understood that Martha's lover shares with Martha the privilege of insulated innocence, and the word discloses a not completely enamoured view of that condition. Absolved from the need to "take thought," the innocent by definition is vulnerable to the moral dangers of "unthinkingness"; the obverse of care-free is care-less or uncaring; the idyll carries the seeds of its own destruction. It is usual to explain the presence of the deserted mother in Wordsworth's poetry by referring to the Annette Vallon episode, and possibly the word suggested itself as an apt critical comment on the improvidence and irresponsibility that had attended his own youthful sansculotte idealism.

The period of peace and "unthinking" happiness in Martha's life belongs to childhood or a virtual childhood of emotional candour, simplicity and trust. On the day that ends this, the day of her jilting:

A pang of pitiless dismay
Into her soul was sent;

A fire was kindled in her breast,
Which might not burn itself to rest.

The phrasing indicates a parallel between the entry of despair (and then madness) into the girl's soul and the conception of the child. A few lines later analogy moves towards implied equivalence:

She was with child and she was mad.

In Wordsworth's fable the fall from innocence takes place when man loses the feelings and perceptions of youth and retains only the memory of them. It is a process of internalization. As soon as he breaks connection, in time or place, with the community of "friends and kindred," exposing himself to adult and worldly experiences, then innocence ceases to be what it appeared to be, an emanation from the physical and social environment, and becomes a small private possession, a potential inner source of joy, at odds with other (inner and outer) influences. Thus Martha, who has been surrounded by the ambience of childhood, now as it were carries her childhood within her.

The poet's ambivalent attitude to the condition of innocence, however, is mirrored in the mother's conflicting responses to the presence of her unborn child. On the one hand its existence contributes to her madness; to be precise, her madness and her pregnancy are the twin consequences of betrayed love. On the other hand the narrator records the opinion of a local sage that the growth of the child restored her sanity:

And grey-haired Wilfred of the glen
Held that the unborn infant wrought
About its mother's heart, and brought
Her senses back again:
And, when at last her time drew near,
Her looks were calm, her senses clear.

The memory of innocence for the adult is both a cause of distress, reminding him of his fallen condition, and a sustaining thought. Nor are the trials of experience without their compensation:

She was with child, and she was mad;
 Yet often was she *sober* sad
 From her exceeding pain.
 (my italics)

The fall lets in suffering but it may also conduce to a steady courage in facing, and to an understanding of, the worst life can offer.

It seems that Wordsworth distinguishes between two phases of experience: the first when the memory of childhood is beneficially active, the second when it is only a memory of loss. For the child dies and its death introduces the third and final stage in Martha's development. The narrator is unable to tell us whether the child was stillborn or was murdered. Gérard, discussing why *we* are left in doubt, quotes a sentence from J. F. Danby, "There is in the poem the possibility of a betrayed mother murdering her child," and adds, "but the point, surely, is that it is never more than a possibility. And in the eyes of Wordsworth, it is an uninteresting possibility."⁶ He explains that the narrator diverts our attention from the factual aspect and the question of guilt and punishment in order to win for Martha's case a compassionate rather than judicative attitude. This is certainly true but it does not follow that the poet is uninterested in how the child died, only that he is concerned with the woman's misery and not her guilt. If he does not want us even to consider the problem, does he entertain the "possibility" of infanticide merely to dismiss it? The question of whether the child's death was an accessory cause of the woman's despair or whether her despair caused her to kill the child is, in fact, presented to us even if it is not answered. In terms of the fable the question is whether innocence in the formed adult dies a natural or an unnatural death. That it remains unanswered means that it is for Wordsworth unanswerable; but it is the most important question that (implicitly) the poet asks. Its enigma, he is saying, will overshadow all the actions of man's maturity.

The development from innocence to experience is reflected in the poem's double view of nature. Curiously

enough, though displayed in other ways, this too is set out as a sequence, imitating the Martha Ray narrative and in fact linked with it, from the one condition to the other. In her youth Martha "gave her . . . company" to Stephen Hill; six months after his desertion she transferred her "company" to the mountain:

While yet the summer leaves were green,
She to the mountain-top would go

In suffering, the time of which coincides with her frequenting of the mountain-top, she finds her maturity: it is as though a mountain were a grown-up hill. (Wordsworth, of course, employs symbolic names elsewhere; in "The Idiot Boy" we have Betty Foy and Susan Gale.) Generally in the poem "mountain" is associated with the stresses of experience and "hill," through the references to the child's reputed burial mound as a "hillock" and a "hill of moss," with innocence. Wordsworth is not entirely consistent — there are occasions "when the whirlwind's on the hill" — but he does not need to be schematic to suggest these connections.

I have been considering in "The Thorn" the rendering of innocence and experience as *successive* states. They are also conceived as not necessarily exclusive of each other. These two points of view correspond roughly to the narrative and the descriptive aspects of the poem but, as I have shown, they are not neatly separated. Thus Martha Ray's name expresses the paradoxical co-existence of the two states in the same consciousness, as of child and adult in the same body. Ray is like the sun's ray and answers to (as it rhymes with) the folk innocence of "she was blithe and gay." Martha brings to mind the sister of Mary who was "careful and troubled about many things" and represents the sheer labour of existence in a fallen condition, the opposite of the purity and hope implied by the surname.

The interpenetration of youth and age, innocence and experience, is less obscurely symbolized in the description

of the natural objects significantly associated with Martha Ray's sufferings. Critics, singling out the images of age, have shown less understanding of their relationship with the images of childhood. They have noted the similarities between the thorn and the woman: the one is "forlorn" and "melancholy," the other is "unhappy," both are "wretched" victims of adverse circumstance and exposed literally to the cruel elements. And on the other hand the thorn-tree seems to show qualities of resilience and endurance, which find another emblem for themselves in the "little muddy pond" that, despite "thirsty suns and parching air," never quite dries up; again Martha, as her history unfolds, becomes for us an image of comparable stoicism. To these points I would add two others. Firstly, both the "muddy pond" and the thorn — "a mass of knotted joints" — are, in their grim encounter with the elements, physically (and perhaps theologically) graceless objects. Secondly, dryness can suggest a drying-up of the emotions, and the pond's successful resistance against final extinction signifies, surely, more than stubborn endurance, an ability still to feel. The analogy with human feeling is made plain in stanza eighteen, when the ripples on the water and the woman's misery are juxtaposed in such a way as to hint a causal connection.

The pond and the tree are, it is agreed then, emblems of age and misery stoically borne. But all four objects — tree, pond, hillock and moss — are linked with ideas of childhood. The thorn is compared to a two years' child in height, the pond's measurements in the notorious 1798 version are close to those of a young child, the hillock is "like an infant's grave in size," the "lovely tints" shown by the moss covering the mound, in part, connote joy and innocence. These details do more than lay down an anticipatory "atmosphere" for a story of possible infanticide. Gérard himself points to the polarity of innocence and experience in these stanzas of description but misses, I think, its deepest implications. There is, for example, the

of youth followed by the death of the child, which is like a lingering memory of youth, is an image for the atrophy of that heightened sensibility ascribed by Wordsworth to man's early years. The mere fusion of the characteristics of youth and age is less responsible for the shock we experience in reading these lines than the horrible insinuation that the youthful part is dead and that its decay is continuously destructive of the living and aging part.

The symbolism of the moss reinforces and extends these implications, while the inherent paradoxes are more startling. The hillock and the tree stand close together and the same mosses that embellish the one cling stiflingly to the other:

Up from the earth these mosses creep,
And this poor Thorn they clasp it round
So close, you'd say that they are bent
With plain and manifest intent
To drag it to the ground . . .

Thus the extremities of life are brought together in yet another way. The horrible but faint insinuation mentioned in the previous paragraph has, however, acquired greater distinctness. The "heap of earth," the hillock, is "like an infant's grave in size" and the mosses that have seemingly malevolent designs upon the thorn creep "up from the earth" in which the infant lies buried: that is, the tree's relationship is with a *dead* child, whose corpse hangs as it were a "dead weight" around its neck. The moss, it appears, brings life to the dead and death to the living. This riddle can only be understood in terms of the Martha Ray story, where it corresponds to the contrary influences exercised by the unborn child upon its mother. I have said that the relationship of the woman's pregnancy to her childhood is like that of memory and that the mentally unsettling and stabilizing effects of her pregnancy represent the opposite emotions which typify man's recollections of innocence. It is memory, then, symbolized by the mosses spreading between the thorn-

tree of age and the grave of dead youth, that brings life to the dead and death to the living. Taking the scene and the narrative together, we might formulate it in this way: mental communion with our childhood revivifies the corpse of innocence at the same time as it encumbers the remembering adult with melancholy regret.

The signs in nature of both carefree enchantment and suffering, presented, in Martha's transition from the "hill" of innocence to the "mountain" of experience, as a sequence in time, are here manifest as a perpetual ambiguity of aspect. The romantic loveliness of "mossy network" decorating the mound ("As if by hand of lady fair/The work had woven been") seems to belie its murderous intentions; nature is shown to be at the same time benevolent and malevolent, creative and destructive. This ambiguity extends even to the flower imagery; the contrast between the luxuriant beauty of the flowers on the grave and the dereliction of the thorn does not, as Gérard assumes, exhaust their symbolic function in the poem. Nature has even, perhaps, not a double but a treble meaning. Three colours are named — "green, red, and pearly white" — and though certainly "a fresh and lovely sight," ostensibly representing the freshness and loveliness of innocence, they have in fact a mixed significance. "Pearly white," of the three, does seem to stand for the delicacy and perfection of innocence. Red, however, is its emotional antithesis. Three references call our attention to it — as "vermilion," "scarlet," and then "red" — before it is coupled with the figure of Martha, who in this first mention of her is wearing a "scarlet cloak" betokening, surely, guilt or bloodshed: this is nature, perhaps, as Tennyson was to see it, "red in tooth and claw." Green, lastly, is the traditional colour-emblem for natural fecundity. It is not stretching ingenuity, I think, to discover a similar range of meanings in the three shapes assumed by the moss, which, according to the narrator, displays itself "In spikes, in branches, and in stars": the spikes signifying ferocity and pairing with the colour

red, the branches signifying a normally creative nature, and the stars, as elsewhere in Wordsworth, unattainable purity of being.

At this point I want to draw attention to a dimension of meaning in "The Thorn" which receives no mention at all from Gérard nor, as far as I am aware, from any other commentator. Gérard identifies "three imaginative elements" whose "intricate interplay" comprises the total effect of the poem: they are "the thorn and its setting, the story of Martha Ray, and the attitude of the narrator."⁸ In fact, as I hope to show, these constituents do not fully explain the poem's effect. A structural element missing from this list springs immediately to mind — the visiting stranger to whom the retired sea-captain is telling his story, the questioner. He may not seem very important, though no-one would deny that he contributes something — or that he appears in other poems of Wordsworth. I indicate him not in a captious spirit but because the part he plays has significance chiefly in that dimension of meaning which interests me, where the poem becomes an inner drama, acted out by several components of Wordsworth's consciousness. These include infant, mother (and their symbolic counterparts in the natural setting), the breeze on the pond, the voices heard at the mountain head, narrator, questioner and, it is perhaps not fanciful to add "grey-haired Wilfred of the glen."

Before presenting evidence for this assertion I should first point out the lacunae in an interpretation that concentrates on the three elements specified by Gérard. (I am aware that my own inventory is not exhaustive and that in places it cuts across his categories.) Take one example. There are things the narrator does not understand, which it is nevertheless essential that the reader *should* understand. When the stranger asks:

But what's the Thorn? and what the pond?
 And what the hill of moss to her?
 And what the creeping breeze that comes
 The little pond to stir?

the narrator answers:

I cannot tell; but some will say
 She hanged her baby on the tree;
 Some say she drowned it in the pond

Firstly he disclaims certain knowledge and then reports the villagers' explanation, which in the next stanza he also dismisses. The answer not given by either character is that the thorn and the pond and the hill of moss are, in the same way as her name, emblematic of Martha Ray's psychical condition. The reader gets *his* enlightenment partly from the interconnections between the descriptive and the narrative elements listed by Gérard, but not entirely: the stranger's questions, which echo the narrator's own phrases back to him, by their almost nagging persistence do much to alert our minds to the enigmatic quality of the presented experience and provoke us to seek a solution at another level of significance. This is the level at which the fable and the tangled iconography of innocence and experience come into being. The "creeping breeze," however, receives no illumination from this source. The phrase refers back to these lines in the preceding stanza:

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!'

In the story the pond is where the infant may have been drowned; in the fable it is an image of endurance and the residual ability to feel; but to comprehend its symbolic function in this context the reader needs to consider its association with the voices of the living and the dead heard on the mountain and with the "shadow" of "a baby's face" which meets the gaze of anyone who looks into the pond. If he does so, he will discover a poem in which figures and objects are materializations of an inner drama and the breezes rippling the water have an allegorical meaning.

The central events in this drama are still the passing of youth and the subsequent death of the child, but they now mirror the waning intensity of that relationship with nature which to a peculiar degree Wordsworth had enjoyed in his early years. Hence nature, which first had cosseted and then betrayed him, presents to the adult poet an ambivalent appearance, alternately congenial and repugnant, inspiring at once love and fear. And the conflicting emotions which accompanied Martha's period of gestation parallel the opposite effects, sanative and dispiriting, which memory of this early intensity and purity of feeling creates in Wordsworth. The doubt whether the heightened sensibility of youth died a natural or an unnatural death is even more pertinent within this dimension of meaning than to the general theme of innocence and experience.

The poem dramatizes not merely the relationship of Wordsworth the man and Wordsworth the boy but of the poet to the source of his poetry. The "little breezes" that ruffle the "waters of the pond" are the airs of inspiration breathing on the mirror of memory, and, the memories being what is intimated by the child's reflection, the process is a mentally disturbing one: the waters "shake" but the woman whose being has been variously identified with the pond "shudders" when this happens. The disembodied voices bear a similar interpretation:

For many a time and oft were heard
Cries coming from the mountain head:
Some plainly living voices were;
And others, I've heard many swear,
Were voices of the dead

The living communing with the dead is a moving image for Wordsworth's characteristic poetic attitude. Again the occasions mentioned are not pleasant ones, and again they are represented as taking place at times when "The *wind* blew from the mountain-peak" (my italics). It is relevant, but not strictly necessary, to recall the opening of *The Prelude*, where, interestingly however, the mood is in complete contrast.

Martha Ray acts in this drama as one of three, or possibly four, personae of the poet. The narrator's mistaking her in the mist for a "jutting crag," offering shelter from the storm, expresses her seeming imperviousness to the buffets of experience. The incident as a whole portrays her as one who has no choice but to face the storms of life and whose self-exposure disqualifies her from helping others to escape them. (In this she contrasts with the poet in "A whirlblast from behind the hill," written on the day before he began "The Thorn," who finds shelter from the whirlblast in an "undergrove" of "embowering hollies"⁹). In her misery and her involuntary courage she is a type of fallen humanity and an intermediary between Wordsworth and his lost innocence. She presides at the conception of his poetry because regret for the circumstances and powers of his youth and the resolve to face "unpalatable facts"¹⁰ were his strongest poetic incentives; despair as much as joy testifies to a persisting relationship with nature. Both the narrator and the questioner are onlookers, belonging to that area of Wordsworth's mind which "recollects in tranquillity." They differ in so far as the former is passionately and compassionately involved in the experience he relates, and the latter scrutinizes it with an almost petulant intelligence. Together these three characters seem to compose Wordsworth's total "personality" in the poem. I shall end, however, by proposing tentatively a fourth persona — "grey-haired Wilfred of the glen." He has taken over the role of sage from Farmer Simpson of the 1798 edition, no doubt because his grey hairs and his lack of a specified occupation lend him a more philosophic guise. His sober yet sympathetic attitude and his implied acceptance of all experience come very near to being the final mood of the poem. May not his name have found favour with the poet for its close approximation to his own?

NOTES

- ¹All quotations are from *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. E. de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), II pp. 240-48.
- ²Albert Gérard, *English Romantic Poetry: Ethos, Structure, and Symbolism in Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Keats*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), pp. 64-87.
- ³*Poetical Works*, II, 511.
- ⁴Gérard, p. 69.
- ⁵Gérard, p. 86.
- ⁶Gérard, p. 79; quoting from J. F. Danby, *The Simple Wordsworth: Studies in the Poems, 1797-1807* (London: Routledge, 1960), pp. 57-72.
- ⁷*Journals of Dorothy Wordsworth*, ed. E. de Selincourt (London: Macmillan, 1941), I, 13.
- ⁸Gérard, p. 66.
- ⁹*Poetical Works*, II, pp. 127-28.
- ¹⁰Gérard, p. 86.