

“The poor tawny wanderers”: The Coleridges, Wordsworth, Arnold and the Gypsies

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BY THE TIME that Samuel Taylor Coleridge had published his *Biographia Literaria* in 1817, the figure of the Gypsy had become a familiar image in poetry and prose. As an image of an ideal society and ultimate freedom, the Gypsies were sometimes portrayed as revolutionary figures, free from the fetters of law and the ties of conventionality and, conversely, were also seen by more conservative critics as figures that threatened the core values upon which decent society was founded; most portrayals of the Gypsy figure by 1817, however, had become complex and sometimes contradictory and therefore do not fall neatly into either of these two categories.¹ Instead they often display a mixture of longing for as well as a fear of everything that the Gypsy figure had come to mean. The four works that are discussed in this paper differ quite dramatically in their treatment of the Gypsies, but despite ranging across a period of fifty years, they reveal a great deal about critical dialogues between the men in the “Wordsworth Circle”, up to and including Matthew Arnold.

In Chapter XXII of his *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge describes what he sees as the five “characteristic defects of Wordsworth’s poetry.” The “fifth and last” defect that he lists is Wordsworth’s occasional use of “thoughts and images too great for the subject” which Coleridge describes as a “*mental bombast*”, that is, “a disproportion of thought to the circumstance and occasion.”² To illustrate his point, Coleridge cites three examples, the second of which is taken from the poem ‘Gipsies’.

Coleridge narrates the circumstances of the poem, disparaging Wordsworth for his lack of sympathy with the conditions of their life:

the poet having gone out for a day’s tour of pleasure, meets early in the morning with a knot of *gypsies*, who had pitched their blanket-tents and straw-beds[...] in some field by the road-side. At the close of day on his return our tourist found them in the same place[...]

Whereat the poet, without seeming to reflect that the poor tawny

¹ For examples see: Gilbert White, *The Natural History of Selbourne* (London: Penguin, 1987), pp. 179-80; Samuel Rogers, *The Pleasures of Memory: A Poem in Two Parts* (1792) (Oxford: Woodstock Books, 1989); John Thelwall, *The Peripatetic or, Sketches of the Heart, Of Nature and Society; In a Series of Politico-Sentimental Journals, In Verse and Prose of the Excursions of Syllanus Theophrastus; Supposed to be Written by Himself: Volume II* (ed.) Thompson, J. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2001), p.196; William Hazlitt, ‘On Manner’, No. 12, (Aug. 27, 1815; Sep. 3, 1815) (eds) A. R. Waller and A. Grove, *The Collected Works of William Hazlitt, Volume I: The Round Table; Characters of Shakespeare’s Plays* (London: J. M. Dent & Co., 1902); Hannah More, ‘Tawney Rachel’ in *Tales for the Common People and Other Cheap Repository Tracts* (Nottingham: Trent Editions, 2002), pp. 85-95; William Cowper, *The Task* (ed.) J. Sambrook, *William Cowper: The Task and Other Selected Poems* (London: Longman, 1994), pp. 74-5; Walter Scott, *Guy Mannering* (1815); George Crabbe, ‘The Lover’s Journey’ in (ed.) N. Dalrymple-Champneys and A. Pollard, *George Crabbe: The Complete Poetical Works, Volume II* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), pp.132-142; Jane Austen, *Emma* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 333-6.

² (Eds) J. Engell and W. J. Bate, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Biographia Literaria, or, Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions*, II (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), pp. 136-8. All subsequent references to this text are taken from this edition.

wanderers might probably have been tramping for weeks together through road and lane, over moor and mountain, and consequently might have been right glad to rest themselves, their children and cattle, for one whole day[...] expresses his indignation in a series of lines[...]

Coleridge then goes on to make his point—that Wordsworth condemns the Gypsies’ apparent idleness using “a diction and imagery... which would been rather above than below the mark, had they been applied to the immense empire of China improgressive for thirty centuries.”

Coleridge’s disapproval of Wordsworth’s bombast is heightened by his careful description of the scene. By elaborating the poet’s rather more limited depiction, and by being very careful to empathize with the probable conditions in which the Gypsies live, Coleridge emphasises the ordinary, mundane and everyday aspects of their lives. This ordinariness is the ground of his objection to Wordsworth’s comparison of the Gypsies’ lack of activity to “the mighty MOON!”—a symbol of power to the poet, but at which the Gypsies refuse to look—and to his supposition that even “The silent Heavens have goings on:/ The STARS have tasks!” In Coleridge’s mind, even if Wordsworth believes that the Gypsies have no tasks, comparing their ordinary human idleness to the activities of the heavens is entirely inappropriate, no more than mental bombast. However, Coleridge might have done well to remember the use he had made of the moon in *The Ancient Mariner*, comparing its movement in the heavens to ‘lords that are certainly expected’ in their native country, a passage which prepares for the ‘spring of love’ which will change the Mariner’s view of reality.

Coleridge’s critique of ‘Gipsies’ is a harsh reading of the poem in which he remains resistant to any suggestive imagery or symbolic potential of the moon and stars. In their different attitudes to Gypsies, we can see that complex response to this section of society that I outlined at the beginning of this paper. Wordsworth’s “knot” (l.1)³ is sinister because it forms an indistinguishable problem of a shape. Coleridge deliberately attempts to undo this knot by emphasising the human and material aspects of the group, and thus he reads against the grain of Wordsworth’s poem. By excluding the sublime and introducing the concept of active occupation, Coleridge changes the emphasis of the poem.

Equally, in his insistence on using the vocabulary of leisure and of the everyday, Coleridge turns Wordsworth’s nightmare vision of inertia into the narrative of a stroll taken by a middle-class gentleman, the sort who would set out to find the picturesque and ideal in nature, but then is disappointed by the dirt and the ordinariness of reality; ignoring Wordsworth’s symbolic repetition of cyclical imagery, the poet’s journey is described as “a day’s tour of pleasure” in which Wordsworth is the chief “tourist”. There is a definite sense of

³ ‘Gipsies’ (1807) from (ed.) S. Gill, *William Wordsworth: The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 332.

contempt in the choice of the word “tourist”, a word which Wordsworth himself uses disparagingly at the start of ‘The Brothers’ (“These Tourists, Heaven preserve us!”) Coleridge’s word-choice deliberately seeks to separate Wordsworth from his subject and instead of portraying Wordsworth as a man who was deeply in tune with his surroundings, Coleridge envisions him as a conceited outsider, ignorant as to the ways of the countryside; any compassionate human in touch with his fellow man would be aware of the Gypsies’ plight “tramping for weeks together through road and lane, over moor and mountain.” That Coleridge then goes on to point out that “such repose might be quite necessary for *them*, as a walk of the same continuance was pleasing or healthful for the more fortunate poet” indicates that he is determined not to read the poem in the spirit in which Wordsworth had written it.

It is possible that there is a complex debate underlying the poem comparable to that underlying ‘Resolution and Independance’, the Immortality and Dejection odes. Coleridge’s sympathy with the Gypsies, ‘the poor tawny wanderers’, may stem from a life-time’s feeling that he was “A Wanderer from my native home”. (PW 75) In 1807, the year that Wordsworth published this poem, Coleridge described his return from Malta: “I found myself again in my native Country — ill, penniless, and worse than homeless.” (CL III 19) Coupled to this was his deeply-felt bitterness that Wordsworth and Dorothy had, by the time he was writing the *Biographia*, lost belief in him, and that his name was a bye-word for idleness. Thus it is possible that he is defending the Gypsies on very personal grounds—that they are not wanderers by choice, and idle only in appearance, only because they are in need of rest. On the other hand, it is quite possible that the poem betrays Wordsworth’s own anxieties about the status of a poet in society, and that his defence is complex in that he does no more than the Gypsies, except walk, but observes and feels in a way that he claims they do not—though we might ask how he should know, since he doesn’t talk to them.

Wordsworth clearly regards the Gypsies as a negative moral example, and Coleridge defends them, probably a little disingenuously, whilst attacking Wordsworth’s ‘*mental* bombast’ in ways that don’t stand close inspection in relation to his own use of similar imagery. I want to look at later critical responses to Wordsworth’s seemingly unprovoked attack on the Gypsies, and also at the poem itself in an attempt to understand Coleridge’s aesthetic hostility and as a prelude to looking at the way in which later poets correct both Wordsworth and Coleridge.

David Simpson describes Wordsworth’s poem ‘Gipsies’ as “a terrible poem by a great poet”.⁴ He sees it as “a hysterically oxymoronic declaration of desire and fear, love and hate, identification and disavowal”⁵ concerned with

⁴ D. Simpson, *Wordsworth’s Historical Imagination: The Poetry of Displacement* (New York/London: Methuen, 1987), p.25.

⁵ D. Simpson, ‘Figuring Class, Sex and Gender’, in (eds) K. Kroeber and G. W. Ruoff, *Romantic Poetry: Recent Revisionary Criticism* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1993), p.156.

just about everything—the socio-historical and political, and the sexual;⁶ James Garrett argues that the anxiety in the poem stems from Wordsworth's preoccupation with counting and quantifying, a process that was part of a larger phenomenon represented by the introduction of the census in 1801.⁷

That the poem can be read in so many different ways, and that the meanings are so diverse, demonstrates the conflicting and complex emotions that the speaker of the poem feels towards the Gypsies. Wordsworth's idea of the "unbroken knot" in the first line of his poem is crucial to its meaning. It is this knot and its completeness that symbolise everything that the speaker of the poem finds disagreeable and threatening about the Gypsies. The "knot" represents the separate, self-contained and inward-looking community of the Gypsies, a space that is outside the usual conventions not only of society, but also of the universe as a whole. That the knot is unbroken shows that the Gypsies have not moved since he last saw them, a fact that Wordsworth finds utterly horrifying, as he states in the final line of the 1807 version of the poem: "The stars have tasks—but these have none".

Eight years after the publication of *Poems in Two Volumes*, Hazlitt criticised Wordsworth's harsh treatment of the Gypsies and pointed out the seeming hypocrisy of a man who was "considered as the prince of poetic idlers"⁸. David Simpson follows Hazlitt and Coleridge in arguing that this vicious outburst at the Gypsies stems from Wordsworth's own anxiety about the legitimacy of his profession, one which appeared to have many similarities to the Gypsies (both are "Traveller[s] under open sky") and the force of the attack stems from the poet's unease at his occupation being as seemingly useless as the lives of the Gypsies.⁹

Wordsworth certainly tries hard to show that his movements are useful and productive, and the speaker's wandering and return to the "self-same spot" is a mirror of the movements of the universe, the sunset and sunrise that mark the beginning and end of each day. Like the speaker, the evening star also treads a cyclical path:

Then issued Vesper from the fulgent west,
Outshining like a visible God
The glorious path in which he trod (ll. 14-6).

Here the speaker depicts himself as a regulated and orderly being, functioning fully within the confines of the universe, and following a pattern that is mapped out from the movement of the sun and the moon down to the smallest creature. The speaker's movements serve to highlight his own

⁶ Simpson, 'Figuring Class, Sex and Gender', p.166.

⁷ J. Garrett, 'The Unaccountable "Knot" of Wordsworth's "Gipsies"', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 40.4 (Autumn 2000), pp.603-620.

⁸ 'On Manner', No. 12, (Aug. 27, 1815; Sep. 3, 1815) (eds) A. R. Waller and A. Grove, *The Collected Works of William Hazlitt, Volume I: The Round Table; Characters of Shakespeare's Plays* (London: J. M. Dent & Co., 1902), p. 46.

⁹ Simpson, *Wordsworth's Historical Imagination*, pp.22-55.

legitimate place in the universe in comparison with that of the Gypsies.

Despite Coleridge's criticism that the language in the final part of 'Gypsies' is disproportionately elaborate for the subject it is addressing, the concentration on the sun and the moon in it is a greater reflection of the cyclical wonderings of the speaker who returns to the same spot after "twelve bounteous hours" (l. 9). That the Gypsies are still lying in this spot not only brings out the speaker's indignation from their sheer idleness but also from the wholly unnatural idea of being completely unconcerned by the larger movements of the universe. What is disturbing here is the Gypsies' total indifference to their surroundings, denying themselves the benefit of guidance by the moon and Nature. Coleridge overlooks this, but both of them use the figure of the Gypsy to explore their own actions and tastes yet in doing so both forget to say much about the Gypsies themselves.¹⁰

I want now to turn to Hartley Coleridge whose poetry contains a subtle but often overlooked critique of his father's and Wordsworth's later poetic output.

Whilst Wordsworth's poem stems from his encounter with an actual group of Gypsies, and Coleridge's comments stem from his reaction to this, Hartley Coleridge's encounter with Gypsies comes from viewing a painting. 'On a Picture Representing Gypsies and Asses' is a complex interrogation of the Gypsies' history, mixing the exotic, the animal and the ancient. Unlike either Wordsworth or STC, Hartley is genuinely interested in the Gypsies for their own sake. Whilst the first line, "Gypsies and Asses. Subjects of all weather!"¹¹ links human and beast in a way that seems to suggest that the Gypsies are not really human at all, this first impression is complicated by what follows.

Where Hartley differs from the two older poets is in his interest in the exotic and eastern roots of the subjects of the painting. Whilst STC's Gypsies appear the most human and "ordinary" of the portrayals in the three works discussed here, and it is hard to distinguish any particular characteristics in Wordsworth's Gypsies, Hartley's Gypsies are very clearly the descendants of an ancient and noble lineage, the dignity of which, in Hartley's eyes, is by no means diminished by being linked to the pedigree of the humble ass.

The compassion that Hartley has for the Gypsies and asses in the poem is an echo of his father's much-maligned poem 'To A Young Ass' (1794), in which Coleridge imagines liberation for a "poor little Foal of an oppressed race" who, despite all its early promise, will end up "chain'd to a log in a narrow spot" like its mother. Hartley alters his father's sentimentality, however, and whilst he feels the same pity for the ass that Coleridge did, he develops his father's utopian fantasy into contemporary sympathy between man and beast, predicated on ancient relationships in which the beast is

10 Wordsworth produced a later version of the poem (1820) in which he changed the ending, possibly in response to STC's criticism, but its concluding view of the Gypsies: "are what their birth/ And breeding suffers them to be;/ Wild outcasts of society!" still amounts to "they are what they are."

11 (Ed.) E. L. Griggs, Hartley Coleridge: New Poems (Oxford: OUP, 1942), p.116.

elevated so that it “would fain impart/ the lessons of an o’er experienced heart” (ll.30-1), to the Gypsy child. Hartley imports the young ass from his father’s poem and views his Gypsy outcasts with the same compassion, thus blending the figures of the Gypsies and the asses to the point that they are almost indistinguishable: it is difficult to tell at the end whether the “dear shaggy infant” (l.32), is the Gypsy child or the foal of the ass.

What at first appears as a simple comparison of Gypsy and ass starts to transform into an interrogation of the figures’ ancestry and familial relationships. One of the most striking aspects of the poem is Hartley’s repeated emphasis on the female sex and although the sex of the ass is never actually stated, the line “and yet the mother’s instinct strong in each” (l. 5) indicates that the main subjects of the poem are indeed female. Although the poem is entitled ‘On a Picture Representing Gypsies and Asses’ the focus of the poem appears to be simply a mother and her child, and one ass, and in this it is strongly reminiscent of pictures of the Madonna and child. There is little doubt as to the religious implications of the ass, the animal on which Jesus rode into Jerusalem, and this, coupled with the mention in line 33 of the human mother and her child who will have much to “abide” emphasises the significance of these figures. The strong religious undertones of the poem add legitimacy and a dignity to the figures from the painting that is missing from the treatment of the Gypsies by Coleridge and Wordsworth; Hartley’s approach to the painting he sees counters Wordsworth’s inability to see past the “knot” of Gypsies, and he picks out the individual features of his subject.

Whilst Hartley presents the mother, child and the ass as a Christian symbol of dignity, love and future suffering, his historical emphasis reaches further back to the Old Testament. He mentions Israel and Moses, both of which bring to mind the idea of suffering and persecution. Yet it is not just the idea of inexplicable human suffering that Hartley is interested in—he also feels keenly for the ass who he mentions was raised to great heights by carrying “Israel’s fairest daughter” (l. 20) but then, as a symbol of constancy and faithfulness in the face of cruelty, was beaten by Balaam despite saving his life (Numbers 22:28). Once the relevance of the Biblical allusions is fully understood, the linking of the Gypsies and the asses changes from being one which could be seen as derogatory to one which shows both sets of figures to be united by both being “beasts of burden” (Matthew 21:5). The reason for this burden in both, however, remains a mystery.

While Wordsworth treats the Gypsies as disturbingly ‘other’ and Coleridge lends a sort of sympathy to the Gypsies primarily to get at Wordsworth, Hartley surpasses both: he links the Gypsies with patient wisdom and locates them in the deep time of human history. Given the verbal echoes between Hartley’s idea of the Gypsy as both ancient and all-knowing, and innocent and vulnerable, and Matthew Arnold’s treatment of the Gypsy child in ‘To A Gypsy

Child By the Sea Shore¹² it is highly probable that Arnold's use of the Gypsy figure was influenced by Hartley, and I am now moving to discuss my fourth and final example.

In his poem, Arnold takes Hartley's idea of the "Babe that[...] looks so old, it can hardly grow older" (l.12), and "that dear shaggy infant[...] that dreams not *yet* of what it must abide", and combines them with the impression left on him by his encounter with a Gypsy child on the Isle of Man in the early 1840s. Whilst Hartley's image of the Gypsy child strives to find the positive, Arnold's child has "an infant's gloom" (l.2), "a meditative guise" (l.3) and is "a meek anticipant of that sure pain" (l.41) which its life will bring. Like Wordsworth, Arnold sees a kind of stasis or inertia in the Gypsy figure, but he invests this with Hartley's sense of dignity and moral awareness: "Thy sorrow and thy calmness are thine own" (l. 19).

Where Arnold's poem is different is that the child itself is separated not only from society but also from its mother, "half averse/ From thy own mother's breast, that knows not thee" (ll. 13-4). This separation is doubly unsettling for the reader. The isolation of the child because it is a Gypsy is one thing. That the child is somehow distanced from its mother whilst being held in her arms is more deeply worrying, given that the picture of a mother and child is a classic figure of "togetherness" and dependency, as is demonstrated by Hartley's suggestion of the Madonna and child. What completes this image of dislocation is that even as a Gypsy (traditionally part of a close-knit tribe) and as a child (who is rarely without its mother) this child appears to be completely alone.

In 'To a Gipsy Child' Arnold goes even further in his revision of Wordsworth's philosophy than has been suggested by the Allotts¹³. In his poem 'Gipsies', Wordsworth is incapable of identifying a separate being in the Gypsy camp and so he describes the group as an "unbroken knot". The Gypsy child in Arnold's poem is so carefully distinguished from its mother (and any other human being) that it is totally alone. Not only is it alone, it is unable to console itself with any of the traditional Wordsworthian comforts: the beauty of nature, the home, knowledge of one's position in the "universe", family and a sense of belonging.

By distancing the Gypsy child from his mother, Arnold also denies any of the comfort that Hartley derives from seeing an ancient dignity in the Gypsies and their animals; the separation of mother and child seems to cause an irrevocable rift between the two figures that leaves the mother firmly in the realms of the temporal (Arnold, it seems, forgets her altogether) and positions the child in the realms of the eternal. Whilst Hartley sees the Gypsies' timelessness and group identity as positive, Arnold's grim certainty of the Gypsy child's age-old wisdom, learned from epochs of suffering and pain, transforms this positivity into desolation and he orphans the child in cosmic

¹² (Eds) K. and M. Allot, *The Poems of Matthew Arnold* (London: Longman, 1979), pp. 22-6.

¹³ See: Allott, *The Poems of Matthew Arnold*, pp. 22-3.

terms: “No exile’s dream was ever half so sad/ Nor any angel’s sorrow so forlorn” (ll. 27-8).

The use of the Gypsy figure by the Coleridges, Wordsworth and Arnold creates an echo chamber of four poetic voices. Starting with Wordsworth’s poem, the figure of the Gypsy resonates from each poet to the next, being altered and re-conceived depending on the writer’s individual style and ethical standpoint. In dialogue with Wordsworth’s poem and Coleridge’s criticism of Wordsworth’s poetics, Hartley Coleridge and Matthew Arnold help us to re-approach the multiple enigmas behind Coleridge’s identification of Gypsies as “poor tawny wanderers”.