

Some Preliminary Remarks for a Workshop on “Tintern Abbey”¹

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ONE HAPPY THOUGHT ABOUT “TINTERN ABBEY” is that it is often less vital to have anything important to say about the poem than simply to revisit it, and such will be the aim of this workshop—though it might also be a fertile ground for new thinking. “Tintern Abbey” is itself, of course, a poem about a revisiting, or as J. H. Prynne says, it involves “understanding through recurrence of recurrence itself”.² The poem projects itself as future memory by offering the past a future as mediated by a return to the horizons of the present. The hope is that any return to the Wye will alter radically the capacity of relationship between past and future. Wordsworth aspires to treat with an offerable past and a receptive future as two mutually dependent but asymmetric divergences which allow room for a sometimes troubled and under-defined present. In retrospect or in anticipation, they have already given way to the present to enable it to be encountered at all. This is done by finding a way for a former visit to put flesh on a present one, or by offering a link to a future moment that will both reinforce and be confirmed by what can be derived from the fragile actuality of passing along the Wye.

To revisit a *visit* and not just the place itself is an attempt to move from the occasional to something more deliberative, as Prynne reminds us,³ so as to re-instate a distance that might pre-echo the 1805 *Prelude*’s earnest search for a “character of deeper quietness / Through pathless solitudes” (IV, 367-8). Along the Wye the path is memory together with its many echoes retrieved or allowed to find their own future at their own pace. The relation between one visit and another will itself be “pathless”, however much the banks of the Wye might be well-worn by tourists. To revisit is to reaffirm a bond which itself echoes the vow of stability or fidelity to a place of community which the Cistercian monks would have originally taken.⁴ In “Tintern Abbey” there is fidelity not just to the flow of time, but an affirmation of time’s own fidelity *to* this flow, or to what Thomas McFarland has referred to as the “infrashape of the stream” as the basis of the longer Romantic lyric.⁵ Geoffrey Hartman also speaks of the wave effects of the rhythms of the poem which in part seek to avoid the feeling of climax or any violent abruptness, however much this is a poem about renewal,⁶ even a new point of origin which will be food for future years. The search for a counter-abrupt ground of nurture which eschews any

¹ These remarks (subsequently elaborated) were intended to preface a joint close reading of the poem during a workshop held at the Coleridge Autumn Study Weekend, October, 2012. I warmly thank all the participants for making it such an instructively lively occasion.

² J. H. Prynne, “Tintern Abbey, Once Again”, *Glossator* 1 (2009): 81-88, p. 84.

³ Prynne, “Tintern Abbey”, 83.

⁴ For Wordsworth’s habit of actual and textual revisiting, see Stephen Gill, *Wordsworth’s Revisitations* (New York: Oxford UP, 2011), 8-10.

⁵ Thomas McFarland, *William Wordsworth: Intensity and Achievement* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1992), 38.

⁶ Geoffrey H. Hartman, *Wordsworth’s Poetry, 1787-1814* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1964), 26-30.

self-absorbing climax might strike us as equally consonant with a monastic ethos. Stability here means staying in a place in order to move *with* that place, deferring to its own rhythms, delays or diversions without accelerating ahead of them. Paradoxically, it may be precisely this which can be offered on, since to remain in a place is to be on call to a future and to retain the past in its greatest simplicity as what is already given without accumulation. We can recall John Denham's description in "Cooper's Hill" of the flow of the Thames as "Strong without rage, without o'erflowing, full". In "Tintern Abbey" there clearly is an overflow of relief and refreshment but one not making claim solely to present abundance: rather, a more attenuated hope in a relationality that will remain open to a future no more dramatically or exceptionally than the meandering contiguities of the river bank itself. There has to be, nonetheless, a poetic energy of intention and re-dedication of the present's momentary footfall.

This sensation of flow is largely borne by a syntactically meandering, improvisatory field of language, which once having found a sound stretches or compresses it, which is to say, elongates or diverts it, lets it bubble on or abut against a momentary obstruction or distraction. Such resistances are reintroduced as instances of poetic faith-keeping into a flow that is not a bland current. Prynne notes the murmuring musicality of the language, its quiescence which amounts to a near-silence at times, a drawing-out which is quiet enough to avoid etiolation. He also senses a tintabulation, not least in the very title- and place-name itself, "Tin-tern".⁷ Most acutely, he attempts to outline phonological features of the language that connect sonically open and closed particles of speech, so that the preference for "felt" rather than "feel", or "trust" as a more end-stopped sound than "true", suggests "the closed end of one state opening the portal to the freedom of the other, from heart to soul".⁸ As mortal beings we can be "stopped, *almost*, in gentle anticipation of our final end".⁹ As such, this a walker's poem touching on the desultory mode of a walking journal in which motifs are suggested by what is observable or what is thinkable at a particular smooth or awkward moment on the path. It is a poem carried by a reflective body which is soothed and dilated by its own physical rhythms negotiating an ongoing location. The written outcome of the poem is itself committed to memory as a pretext for re-encountering memory itself. It is, in a sense, written *on* the body, so that the process of composition has both to archive its own past while leaving open sufficient progress into a further unravelling of its self-authenticating form. Something has already been settled on as memorable, something akin is there to pursue. This will not conclude in an attempt to render all human experience embodyable, however. The poem knows it must be written down and disseminated sooner or later, and its fabric has already been pre-distributed through ambulatory engagement with another figure, simultaneously the gap between bodies: Dorothy is herself at once

⁷ Prynne, "Tintern Abbey", 82.

⁸ J. H. Prynne, "Mental Ears and Poetic Work", *Chicago Review* 55.1 (2010): 126-57, pp.135-6.

⁹ Prynne, "Mental Ears", 136.

contiguous reception and contingent resistance. We shall return to her participation in the poem.

Before revisiting "Tintern Abbey" any further, a summary of the historical and circumstantial background will be useful. Wordsworth had first visited the Wye in August, 1793, on a tour of Wales and the West Country, partly in the company of his friend Robert Jones, but also alone for some of that time. This was to be the period of a much darker, bleaker experience of landscape in crossing Salisbury Plain. A draft of that poem was to be sketched in September, 1793. Wordsworth had his sister as companion throughout the 1798 tour and they probably passed Tintern on the 11th July, crossing on the ferry to regain Bristol by the 13th. He may well have had with him a copy of William Gilpin's *Observations on the River Wye*, and, if so, the second edition of 1792, and was still in part using the picturesque as a framework through which to view landscape, while clearly having his own preoccupations and pressures. Gilpin's original tour had taken place in the summer holiday of 1770 (the year of Wordsworth's birth) and the *Observations* were first published in 1782 at the instigation of William Mason but also in part to raise money for a local poor school Gilpin wanted to establish at Boldre in the New Forest where he had settled. Tintern Abbey was already well-established as a Mecca for tourists, as noted by Gilpin, and was a centre for local boat-trips which were also the commonest means of arrival. It was also anything but solitary, being not only a site of charcoal-burning but attractive for beggars sucked in by the tourism, and perhaps also by lingering memories of the monastery as a place of hospitality for the traveller on the road. Unpastoral activity was nothing new. Once the monks had been driven from their *locus amoenus*, furnaces were set up in the sixteenth century and the surrounding site was used for the manufacture of iron wire. In the eighteenth century there had been tenements among the ruins, but by the mid-century some self-conscious restoration or "Gothic ruin creation" was underway by the local landowner, the Duke of Beaufort, though he was careful to leave ivy dangling from the walls or from any surviving fenestration—a feature that continued to be prized until after the First World War.

To what extent is Wordsworth's poem *about* Tintern Abbey? The Abbey is certainly used as a marker for a section of the Wye that has no other obvious label, and also evokes a presence distanced in time and place that signifies not just pastoral tranquillity but the possibility of settling within it or even of dying within it—as the originally anti-pastoral "et in Arcadia ego" motif came to mean.¹⁰ To be "above" the Abbey could be taken to connote being nearer the source than the ruin itself, so that poetry is actively working "upstream" in terms of bringing a new immediacy and naturalism to human spirituality. But such connotations may be little more than critical murmurings attracted by pushing against the bias of the river's own flow. The "aboveness" of Wordsworth's title has been much written about; most recently by Mark

¹⁰ See Erwin Panofsky, *Meaning and the Visual Arts* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1983), 295-320.

Canuel in terms of the secularity of the poem: unlike earlier writers like Marjorie Levinson who insist on a return to an actively forgotten history, Canuel discerns in the poem an ethical tolerance which does not simply shift worship from God to Nature by being “above” the Abbey but is able to recall a place of worship and also distance itself from it. In the same way, what is shared with Dorothy does not insist on any exact replication as such, though there is a hope that paths can be shared.¹¹ It is not so much, one could say, that Wordsworth strategically stations himself “above” the monastic site, but that he finds himself to be there in terms of the very poem that can be improvised along the way. As Prynne observes of Wordsworth’s language at this juncture, “Such features are neither invented nor discovered, they are disclosed”.¹² The apparently inconsequential but privately haunting date of July 13th has also been much commented on. The main undertones are that Wordsworth and Robert Jones reached Calais on that day in 1790; in 1793 it was the date of Marat’s murder at the hands of Charlotte Corday as Wordsworth was to record in Book VI of the *Prelude*; July 13th 1797 saw the brother and sister move into Alfoxton. As well as being the day before (*ie* below) the storming of the Bastille in 1789, it was also the final day of their tour in 1798, a token of the completability of the poem and its onset as a text. Not least, the poem’s lengthy title leaves moot the question of what *else* might be open to experience on a July 13th, what other major events or private discoveries might so be commemorated. Most simply, the date reappropriates from within the poem an index of given time which can only resonate in the memory if it also flows on, and by so doing, actively draws in a future to which it offers to negotiate its non-command of that future by means of a non-indifferent past.

“Tintern Abbey” guards the exit from *Lyrical Ballads* much as “The Ancient Mariner” glowers at its entrance gates, ensuring that the first edition was to be haunted by two very different, outstanding poetic statements. *Lyrical Ballads* was already being printed by June, 1798, which makes “Tintern Abbey” as much an after-thought or make-weight as its climax. There is no attempt to work like a ballad—Coleridge described “Tintern Abbey” as ‘written in [Wordsworth’s] own character...’ (BL II 8)—and from the opening line the blank-verse carves out a distinct territory and manner, but there is one family resemblance: both genres re-internalise a pre-existing outward form. The ballad is a story-telling here lyricised and moralised, while “Tintern Abbey” is a reflective mutation of the pedestrian or loco-descriptive poem where “narrative” continues as the placed movement of meditation itself. In many ways, Wordsworth’s poem appears more of a response to Coleridge’s conversation poems (“Frost at Midnight” had been penned 5 months before) than as a foil to “The Ancient Mariner” or Coleridge’s Gothic imagination. However, in another sense, “The Ancient Mariner” has itself to do with wave-

¹¹ Mark Canuel, “Historicism, Formalism and “Tintern Abbey””, *European Romantic Review* 23.3 (2012): 363-71, p.365.

¹² Prynne, “Mental Ears”, 138.

effect (identified by Hartman as a distinctive technique in "Tintern Abbey"¹³) via tide and flow, and also has its own ambulatory or processional epilogue when the Mariner wistfully desires to walk to the kirk in a "goodly company". Dorothy herself represents something of that "goodly company" within "Tintern Abbey". However, critics like Heather Glen and Emma Mason stress that Wordsworth does intend us to read "Tintern Abbey" in its immediate context as the coda to *Lyrical Ballads*. The "still sad music of humanity" connects to the woeful dirge of "The Thorn" or the social and economic reversal of "The Last of the Flock" or even the predicament outlined in "The Convict" which in 1798 immediately preceded "Tintern Abbey" itself and cannot have been so placed by accident. Emma Mason explains how "Tintern Abbey" is designed to awaken the importance of reflection as an embodiment of the feeling Wordsworth hopes his readers will have already brought to his more socially disturbing poems on preceding pages.¹⁴

Nonetheless, "Tintern Abbey" equally begs to be read as pointing beyond the moment of *Lyrical Ballads*, to new ways of expressing both streams of emotion and the necessity for personal judgment and decision once faced with the after-effects of social and cultural predicaments. Of course, the lyricised ballads already do this themselves, but in a sense their mind is already made up and they demand no further room for themselves other than their complex of character, emotion and outcome. Just as "Tintern Abbey" cannot leave off before turning to Dorothy, so the early *Prelude* sketches written in Goslar the next winter get off the ground by being addressable to Coleridge. John Barrell sees "Tintern Abbey" as a satellite-poem to what was becoming the planetary outline of the *Prelude*;¹⁵ Charles Rzepka declares that the *Prelude* goes on to build an edifice of identity based on this newly launched power of poetic reflection.¹⁶ It is around these years that Wordsworth will also be working on *Home at Grasmere* which is itself intended for a post-*Prelude* work of philosophical self-realisation. There is a further anticipation in "Tintern Abbey" when, in his 1800 note, Wordsworth identifies the poem as fulfilling "the principle requisites" of the ode with its impassioned transitions.¹⁷ "Artificial irregularity" was the formula the ode predominantly signified in the period and it had been one of the main debating points in the second half of the eighteenth century. Coleridge, in writing to Cottle in June, 1798, speculates that the whole of *Lyrical Ballads* might be offered as an ode itself, constituting one work, essentially in kind if not in degree (CL I 412). And in the "still sad music of humanity" in particular we might detect pre-echoes of the struggle to overcome extinguished vision and revisit a chastened hope that figures in the "Intimations" ode and will constitute the extended narrative of the 1805

¹³ Hartman, *Wordsworth's Poetry*, 26.

¹⁴ Emma Mason, *The Cambridge Introduction to William Wordsworth* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010), 76-8.

¹⁵ John Barrell, "The Uses of Dorothy: 'The Language of the Sense' in 'Tintern Abbey'" in *Wordsworth*, ed. John Williams (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993), 142-71, p.143.

¹⁶ Charles Rzepka, *The Self as Mind: Vision and Identity in Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Keats* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1986), 85.

¹⁷ William Wordsworth, *The Poetical Works*, Volume II, ed. Ernest de Selincourt (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1940-49), 517.

Prelude.

"Tintern Abbey" does not conclude simply on the outskirts of Bristol but by the mutation of apparent soliloquy towards overt address. Greeting and welcoming Dorothy into the texture of the poetry now feels able to engage in an act of sharing a future hope in what might not be two identical futures. And this particular *aversio*, or turn of voice, defies rhetorical convention by addressing someone present rather than absent, though through his sister Wordsworth will also address his future, potentially absent, self. Dorothy's growing mind becomes a screen upon which the effect of the present can be staged as if already a memory. This can only be done because the present is also an intention, an act of rededicating a passage through tranquillity and restoration, which, if it is to be efficacious, cannot simply be consumed by the present itself. Such would be an untimely consummation, untimely because unoffered to other moments, other versions, of before and after.

Does Dorothy's role here also involve victimisation? For John Barrell, she must remain a child and nurse if the poet is to regain his manhood after his political traumas.¹⁸ More searchingly, Toby Benis's Dorothy can activate both Wordsworth's past and her own future, in what is less a time-line than a time-web where disjoined moments of experience abutting one another come together in the person of Dorothy. Dorothy's vibrancy enables an indirect recapturing of the poet's own youth.¹⁹ One might add that with it comes the poetic hope for a different path of flowering, a different and less traumatic course for Dorothy's own development beyond early adulthood. Suzanne Stewart has characterised Dorothy as "a perfect electrometer" (CL I 331) whose much quicker response to the natural world enables her to go deeply into and beyond it simultaneously, dissolving within nature to acquire a radical intimacy with it.²⁰ This is something Wordsworth feels he can no longer do or could never have done as spontaneously as his sister, but it is also a quality he lays aside within the meditative texture of his poem while simultaneously addressing it, making space for it but not stabilizing it within his own sensibility. This address to Dorothy is always going to have to go beyond the didactic, since to admit another in this way cannot be reduced to seeing one's own past self reflected and one's present self inherited, though this seems to be the overt programme of the poem at this stage. But such a speaking out cannot be less than a speaking for, a deployment of inadequate conventions to allow speaking itself to continue to explore relation and contradiction, with the prospect of reconciliation across disparities of outcome while the walk continues. Canuel is surely right to stress the "secularity" of the poem to the extent that its hope is not just in dependent relationship (with its trace of subjection and imitation) but in that hope's basic tolerance of discrepancy.

¹⁸ Barrell, "The Uses of Dorothy," 143.

¹⁹ Toby R. Benis, *Romanticism on the Road: the Marginal Gains of Wordsworth's Homeless* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), 135.

²⁰ Suzanne Stewart, "A Finely Tuned Instrument: Dorothy Wordsworth and Synaesthetic Experience" in *Grasmere, 2012: Selected Papers from the Wordsworth Summer Conference*, ed. Richard Gravil (Penrith: Humanities-Ebooks, 2012), 68-86, p. 73.

One can say here that this will not be privileged above relation itself, however—it will not find consonance too easy should it be available. Should Dorothy develop in just the way the poem outlines and continue to be its witness, there is a trust that this will be a non-coercive sharing despite received predominance not having been laid aside. And if Dorothy seeks for self-forgetfulness rather than dialogue, as Stewart suggests,²¹ implying that this may go beyond the terms of gender suspicion, the poem cannot withhold an expectation of identity between brother and sister which may still remain under-motivated or emergent. What there is of resemblance has been brought out by a common passage as much as through the leading model of an older brother, and the poem at this point lays asleep any more punctilious, discriminating faculty. Or it invites us as readers to do so in its very address to a figure who is not herself a co-producer of the text, and who therefore implicates a distance and a dynamic not wholly containable by it. If it were impossible *not* to regard such issues as decisive, *not* to recognise this as the moment where the walking tour loses its way, Dorothy herself would have become isolated within a juxtaposition of passive dissonance.

²¹ Stewart, "A Finely-Tuned Instrument", 81.