

Peter Bell
Wordsworth's addiction to doubt
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IN THIS PAPER I ARGUE THAT ALONGSIDE the indisputable evidence of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's influence on the writing of *Peter Bell*, Wordsworth used the poem to reflect on how he believed he had changed from the person he had been when he had left England for France in 1791, to the poet he had become following his arrival at Racedown in 1795. In *Peter Bell* those four years are condensed into a single night describing Peter's journey through Swaledale. What Wordsworth set out to achieve in *Peter Bell* is therefore comparable to what he was to attempt two months later in his *Lines Written a few miles above Tintern Abbey*, and after that in the autobiographical poetry he began to write in the following three months in Goslar. The difference in style should not divert us from regarding *Peter Bell* as a foundational text for what became his poem on 'the growth of a poet's mind', *The Prelude*. As a profoundly personal and self-consciously experimental poem, therefore, *Peter Bell* became a potential repository for everything that had happened to its author: the agonies of the years 1791 to 1795, and the restorative experience of first Racedown, and then Alfoxden from 1797 to 1798, when the high seriousness of writing new poetry for a nation in the throes of war mingled with the influences of a fellowship of the kind that has been described by John Worthen as 'fraternal, kind, affectionate'.¹

Coleridge and Peter Bell

Initially, however, it is important to assess the significance for *Peter Bell* of the collaborative ethos in which Wordsworth and Coleridge were working at Alfoxden, and subsequently in the Lake District.² The nature of the creative partnership between Coleridge and Wordsworth was by no means peculiar to the genesis of *Lyrical Ballads*. In 1797 Schiller and Goethe embarked on a collaboration that became known as their *Balladjahr*. Goethe, who here resembles Coleridge, planned to write poetry that drew on supernatural traditions of apparitions, magic, and popular belief, while Schiller was to match it with work reflecting the human sphere of ethical choice. Unlike the circumstances in which the solemn undertaking of the German poets had been made, however, the intense and increasingly fraught relationship between Coleridge and Wordsworth was offset by a readiness to revert to light hearted banter at their own expense. In 'The Moon in a Passion' Coleridge's depiction of the way the coterie had become obsessed by moon-gazing exudes a sense of congenial, good natured camaraderie:

¹ John Worthen, *The Gang: Coleridge, the Hutchinsons and the Wordsworths in 1802* (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2001), 15.

² For *Peter Bell* all quotations are from William Wordsworth, *Peter Bell*, John E. Jordan (Ed.), (Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 1985). Page and line numbers in text. For *Lyrical Ballads* all quotations are from William Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads and Other Poems 1797-1800*, James Butler and Karen Green (Ed.), (Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 1992). Page and line numbers in text.

So here's Botheration,
 To those Pests of the Nation,
 Those fun jeering,
 Conjuring,
 Sky-staring,
 Lowngering,
 Vagrants, that nothing can leave in its station – ³

In 'The Tinker' Wordsworth is surely admitting that even he welcomes a break from the dire pronouncements of Armytage, the philosophical pedlar who instructs the poet narrator of *The Ruined Cottage*:

Who leads a happy life
 If it's not the merry Tinker?
 Not too old to have a Wife;
 Not too much a thinker ... ⁴

'The Moon in a Passion' and 'The Tinker' are to be found on a single sheet of paper containing the writing of Coleridge, Wordsworth, Dorothy, and Mary; one example of the many instances, Worthen argues, where we witness the way the two poets and their immediate circle undertook composition as an intimately shared activity. It is not surprising, therefore, that when he read *Peter Bell* Wordsworth did so—as Hazlitt noted—with a smile hovering about his lips. Without this capacity for humour, their relationship would not have survived their time spent together in Somerset, let alone the expedition to Germany and subsequent arrival in the Lake District. Fred Blick makes a compelling case for his belief that both poets collaborated to write 'The Barberry-Tree' between 1801 and 1802, a poem that parodies Wordsworth's so-called 'simplicity' with evident relish. Despite their increasingly strained relationship, 'The Barberry-Tree' confirms the persistence of their long established habit of alleviating the seriousness with which they viewed their work with recourse to intervals of parodic buffoonery:

The piping breeze and dancing tree,
 Are all ALIVE and glad as we;
 Whether this be truth or no
 I cannot tell, I do not know;
 Nay – whether now I reason well,
 I do not know, I cannot tell! –
 But this I know, and will declare,

³ Worthen, 36. John R. Williams describes Schiller as having 'encouraged and irritated, stimulated and exasperated [Goethe] in a productive tension that powered one of the most remarkably symbiotic and fruitful literary partnerships ever known.' *The Life of Goethe*, (Blackwell, Oxford, 1998), 106.

⁴ *The Poems of William Wordsworth*, Jared Curtis (Ed.), (HEB, Penrith, 2014), 718, 1-4.

Rightly and surely *this* I know;
 That never *here*; that never *there*;
 Around me, aloft, or alow;
 Nor here, nor there, nor *any*-where,
 Saw I a scene so very fair.⁵

Coleridge and Wordsworth, like Goethe and Schiller, had made a commitment to a partnership that was as concerned to feed off aesthetic difference as take strength from the establishment of common ground. It should not therefore be surprising to find that as Wordsworth began to interrogate his own recent history through events narrated in *Peter Bell*, Coleridge, in the guise of the poet of *The Ancient Mariner*, *Christabel*, and *Kubla Khan*, makes an appearance in the text. The poem is not, however, primarily concerned to critique Coleridge. Wordsworth's intention was to bring Peter and himself to common ground; he achieves this through the device of a timid and easily confused narrator who recounts Peter's gradual transformation from selfish brute to a fully socialised human being. In the process he fed off the creative tension brought about by the joint venture of the *Ballads*; Coleridge's presence as an alternative voice in this respect is valued, and Wordsworth uses the Prologue to *Peter Bell* to make it clear that regretfully, after an ill-fated attempt at co-authorship, Coleridge's Ancient Mariner would have to set sail without him.

The poem's narrator describes how he has been tempted to sail into the sky in a moon boat, rather than fulfil his promise to tell his story of Peter Bell to a group of children waiting for him in his garden. The boat does its best to be persuasive:

I know a deep romantic land,
 A land that's deep and far away;
 And fair it is as evening skies
 And in the farthest heart it lies
 Of deepest Africa.

Or we'll into the world of fairy
 Among the lovely shades of things,
 The shadowy forms of mountains bare
 And streams and bowers and ladies fair,
 The shades of palaces and kings. (52, 91-100)

The narrator's decision to resist the moon boat's invitation inevitably suggests a light-hearted rejection of what Coleridge is doing in the *Mariner*, *Christabel*, and *Kubla Khan*. All links with *The Ancient Mariner* are not, however, rejected. Throughout *Peter Bell*, Peter's journey is referred to as a voyage; he

⁵ Fred Blick, 'Wordsworth's Dark Joke in "The Barberry Tree"', in *Romanticism* 20.3, 2014, 258.

sets off 'With all the sail that he can carry', but it is not long before he admits to being 'founder'd in these woods' (72, 338; 76, 381). Peter's voyage, like that of the Mariner, is surrounded by strange occurrences which have their part to play in Peter's eventual salvation. In every case, however, the intervention of supernatural forces is ultimately found to be a function of the natural world, though they are to be deemed no less miraculous for that. It is in this way, through the positive dynamic of their antithetical relationship, that Coleridge is bound in to Wordsworth's text.

Wordsworth's choice of the moon to represent the boat he eventually rejects as the source of inspiration for his poem serves in a similar way to celebrate his companionship with Coleridge. In her Alfoxden Journal Dorothy linked the inception of *Peter Bell* with the sight of 'the moon crescent',⁶ and from the Journals as from the poetry we can see that moon gazing was a persistent activity that bound them together; it was a point of reference for their shared engagement with their deepest thoughts and fears, and as such it was incorporated into the output of both men. Appropriately, then, the entire action of *Peter Bell* takes place by moonlight.

When the shade of Kubla Khan is cast across the page of *Peter Bell*, it is also in a light hearted vein. At the beginning of Part Three, Wordsworth's narrator sets out to tell his audience a ghost story. In a jaunty, off-hand manner, we hear the Gothic tale of a good man who might certainly remind us of Coleridge:

... a gentle soul,
Though giv'n to sadness and to gloom,
And, for the fact I'll vouch, one night
It chanc'd that by a taper's light
This man was reading in his room. (116, 926-10)

His circumstances are not that far removed from those which are supposed to have prompted the writing of *Kubla Khan*. Where Coleridge dreamt, this man read, 'as you or I might read / At night in any pious book' (118, 931). Suddenly the room and the 'snow-white page' is plunged in darkness. The light of his candle moves mysteriously to form a word on the black page, a word so terrible that the poor reader can never bring himself to reveal what it was beyond the fact that it filled him with an overwhelming sense of guilt. The possible reference here to *Kubla Khan* is, however, swiftly replaced by the presence of Wordsworth in the persona of his narrator, who proceeds to deliver a lecture to the 'Dread Spirits' in the way a Headmaster might reprimand a group of recalcitrant children, although at the same time he admits to having some respect for them, '... this I speak in reverence'.

Like the 'gentle soul' quietly reading his book, the narrator too has been haunted by these same spirits:

⁶ Dorothy Wordsworth, *The Grasmere and Alfoxden Journals*, Pamela Woof (Ed.), (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002), 152.

Your presence I have often felt
 In darkness and the stormy night,
 And well I know, if need there be,
 Ye can put forth your agency
 Beneath the sweet moonlight. (120, 966-70)

Once again, as with the voyage motif and the presence of the moon, Wordsworth is celebrating both difference and common ground with Coleridge; but as with the Prologue we must appreciate that Wordsworth's subject is Wordsworth, and through his narrator he explains that his spirits are wayward and confused agents of God, who in their time have attempted without success to intimidate him. His message for them is that there are Godless people in the world whose minds are dead to the influences of Nature. They are possessed by selfish cruelty and wickedness, leaving room only for shallow superstition. It is to such as these—men like Peter Bell, not Coleridge—that the Spirits should make their way in order to frighten them into a state of contrition for living a Godless, selfish life. Based on his own experience, the narrator insists, truly 'good men' who 'feel the soul of Nature / And see things as they are' have nothing to fear from these 'Spirits of the mind' because they are powerless among 'good men' (118, 951-55).

Behind this authoritative statement by the narrator lurks a far less confident persona, one continually betrayed by the hesitancy with which he narrates his tale. It has already taken a Prologue of thirty-one stanzas to settle him finally to his apparently down-to-earth task. He then has a false start and needs to be called to order by his listeners who insist he begins at the beginning. In Part Three he digresses for twelve stanzas into the Gothic ghost story of the haunted reader, a story not so very different from that which he seemed to reject in the Prologue. He is prepared to invoke a world of spirits who would be very much at home in Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner* in order to bring about Peter Bell's reformation, admitting along the way his own sense of unworthiness to fulfil his poetic vocation:

Oh! would that any, friend or foe,
 My further labour would prevent!
 On me it cannot easy sit,
 I feel that I am all unfit
 For such high argument. (122, 976-80)

The conclusion of this sequence binds together the narrator, Peter, and Wordsworth himself, when the narrator confesses that he is a 'thoughtless man' who has danced in his time 'to many a giddy measure'. Though the immediate subject of his 'narration' is the story of Peter Bell, it could equally be that of the poet described in *Tintern Abbey* as 'more like a man / Flying from something that he dreads, than one / Who sought the thing he loved'

(118, 71-3); it is the story of a man struggling to find a form for his poetry that will enable him to fulfil his destined role as the first poet of the age:

I've played, I've danced with my narration,
 A happy and a thoughtless man;
 I've moved to many a giddy measure,
 But now, my Friends, for your good pleasure
 I'll do the best I can. (122, 981-5)

Wordsworth's Peter Bell

As Peter Bell makes his way through Swaledale Wordsworth walks with him every step of the way, observing a nightmare representation of the man he once was, and the man he might have become. Though initially presented as a tale intended for children, it is evident at the outset that Peter is a deeply unpleasant man, but the metre suggests more of a pantomime villain in a children's story:

His face was keen as is the wind
 That cuts along the hawthorn fence;
 Of courage you saw little there
 But in its stead a medley air
 Of cunning and of impudence. (68, 275-9)

It very soon becomes apparent that Peter's sadistic nature renders him disturbingly evil. As he beats the ass who refuses to allow him to ride it, 'Each blow the arm of Peter stings / Up to the elbow and the shoulder' (82, 469-70). Wordsworth told Isabella Fenwick in 1843 that he had modelled Peter on an itinerant potter he had met in the Wye valley; this links the poem to the point in his travels in 1793 that he later refers to in *Tintern Abbey*, where he describes himself as being like a man pursued; once astride the ass, Peter likewise becomes convinced that he is being pursued by avenging spirits:

And ever, where along the down
 They go with smooth and steady pace,
 You see driven onward by the wind
 A dancing leaf that's close behind,
 Following them o'er that lonely place.

And Peter hears the rustling leaf
 And many a time he turns his face
 Both here and there ere he can find
 What 'tis which follows close behind
 Along that lonely place.

At last he spies the wither'd leaf
 And Peter is in sore distress.
 'Where there is not a bush or tree
 The very leaves they follow me,
 So huge hath been my wickedness.' (112-4, 861-75)

This is a passage that suggests Wordsworth's partiality for lines in Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner*:

Like one, that on a lonely road
 Doth walk in fear and dread,
 And having once turn'd round, walks on
 And turns no more his head:
 Because he knows, a frightful fiend
 Doth close behind him tread.⁷

Predicated on the recognition of sin and the need for atonement, at this point *Peter Bell* brings together Peter Bell and the Mariner (the ass and the albatross are of the same symbolic species), and most significantly Wordsworth himself, in a common quest to penetrate the mysteries of the supernatural, and the way that nature mediates between the supernatural and the human mind.

Peter Bell's relationship to the landscape, however, remains analogous to that of Wordsworth's to the Wye Valley in 1793 as Peter labours across 'huge rough stones' and 'through the yawning fissures old' (72, 346-50). In *Tintern Abbey* Wordsworth describes himself encountering 'The sounding cataract ... the tall rock, / The mountain, and the deep and gloomy wood', and at the core of his memory lies a confession of selfishness. The satisfaction he took in the scenery of the Wye Valley 'had no need of a remoter charm, / By thought supplied, or any interest / Unborrowed from the eye.' Most telling is the admission that, for all his efforts, 'I cannot paint / What then I was' (*Lyrical Ballads* 118, 76-7). When linked to the comment that his mood at this time was that of someone pursued by an undefined dread, Wordsworth's progress closely resembles Peter Bell's journey through Swaledale.

Peter is only too ready to translate the difficulties of the terrain into an anxiety prompted by superstitious fear of evil powers:

The path grows dim and dimmer still;
 Now up, now down his way he wends
 With all the sail that he can carry
 Till he is brought to an old quarry
 And there the path-way ends.

'What back again, old grim-face? No!

⁷ PW 161 446-451

I'll grapple with the devil first;
 Stretch like a yawning wolf your paws
 But dam'me if by any laws
 Of yours I'll ever be coerced.'

And so where on the huge rough stones
 The black and massy shadows lay
 And through the dark and through the cold
 And through the yawning fissures old
 Did Peter boldly press his way. (72, 336-50)

This situation has come about because Peter has been tempted to find a short cut. In a very obvious way (and the poem is, after all, presented as a story told primarily for the entertainment of the children present) Peter has chosen to leave the straight and narrow path for what appears to be an easier route: 'He took the path, the path did lead / Across a smooth and grassy mead' (70, 323-4). Unlike Wordsworth at Racedown, he has no inclination, once things start to go wrong, to reflect on how he might learn from his error. Wordsworth's *The Borderers* and *The Ruined Cottage* had already forcefully made the point that there could be no short cut to the resolution of the country's political and social difficulties, no matter how 'smooth and grassy' the claims of Paine or Godwin might once have appeared to Wordsworth's generation.

Struggling through the increasingly tangled undergrowth Peter comes unexpectedly on a hidden meadow:

... in a moment opened out
 A scene of soft and lovely hue
 Where blue and grey and tender green
 Together made as sweet a scene
 As ever human eye did view. (74, 752-5)

This is not of course Peter's response to the meadow, it is the narrator's. Wordsworth in 1793, and Peter Bell at this point in his journey, are unaware of the vision of the 'one life', but with hind sight the narrator of *Peter Bell* can say:

On a fair prospect some have looked
 And felt, as I have heard them say,
 As if the moving time had been
 A thing as steadfast as the scene
 On which they gazed themselves away. (66, 236-45)

If the narrator here is not Wordsworth himself, he certainly betrays an intimate knowledge of the mind of the poet who had written the 'one life' passage for *The Pedlar*, and who wrote in 'Expostulation and Reply': 'Why William, sit you

thus alone, / And dream your time away?' (*Lyrical Ballads* 107, 3-4). As the narrator describes this 'scene of soft and lovely hue', he adds:

And is there no one dwelling here,
No hermit with his beads and glass?
And does no little cottage look
Upon this green and silent nook?
Does no one live near this green grass? (74, 371-5)

Some three months later Wordsworth, the narrator of *Tintern Abbey*, will carry this moment in Swaledale forward into his contemplation of the Wye Valley when he writes of:

... these pastoral farms
Green to the very door; and wreathes of smoke
Sent up, in silence, from among the trees,
With some uncertain notice, as might seem,
Of vagrant dwellers in the houseless woods,
Or of some hermit's cave, where by his fire
The hermit sits alone. (116-7, 17-23)

As he watches Peter in the guise of his narrator, Wordsworth gazes at the ghost of his former self. Peter's sudden discovery of the remote, peaceful clearing where the action of the poem takes a significantly new turn is a further indication of how closely Peter is related to the poet. As a child skating, Wordsworth recalled:

Not seldom from the uproar I retired
Into a silent bay, or sportively
Glanced sideways, leaving the tumultuous throng.

Exhausted by the hubbub of the London streets he described how 'at length':

Escaped as from an enemy, we turn
Abruptly into some sequestered nook,
Still as a sheltered place when winds blow loud.⁸

From 1795 onward, Wordsworth's poetry abounds in the use of a divided self in the process of narration, and this is reinforced by his use of contradictory experiences (in *The Prelude*, for example, crossing the Alps and climbing Snowden) to reveal a mind in constant need of correction and adjustment. The sudden discovery of the clearing in *Peter Bell* is one such moment of revelatory contrast and contradiction; it presages the gradual reformation of

⁸ William Wordsworth, *The Prelude* 1799, 1805, 1850, Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill (Ed.), (New York and London, W. W. Norton, 1979), 5, 170-3; 236, 184-6.

Peter, though like Wordsworth making his hectic way through the Wye Valley in 1793, he still has a long way to go.

In the clearing Peter finds an ass, but despite his brutal attempts, it refuses to move. In 'The Baker's Cart' fragment (composed during work on *The Ruined Cottage*) the horses that habitually stopped to deliver bread to the villagers in peace-time now need to be cruelly whipped forward, while in *Benjamin the Waggoner* (1806), Benjamin's horses halt 'reluctantly' outside the inn where he is going to be tempted back to drunkenness, and the dog, chained beneath the wagon, gives a 'monitory' growl, warning of Benjamin's imminent fall from grace.⁹ Peter is quick to imagine and defy the voice of what he takes to be the devil as he stumbles through the undergrowth; he is as yet incapable of recognising the monitory voice of nature uttered through the behaviour of the silent endurance of the ass (as it is through the animals in *Benjamin* and 'The Baker's Cart'), and he mercilessly continues to beat the creature. *Peter Bell* incorporates all the preoccupations associated with the many voices that make up Wordsworth's writing as it developed through his composition of *The Ruined Cottage* and *Lyrical Ballads*. In *Peter Bell* they appear sketched in with a degree of spontaneity that is frequently responsible for an ambiguity of tone hovering somewhere between tragedy and farce as the diffident narrator struggles to proceed.

When the Ass does finally respond to Peter's brutality, there is again a suggestion of lines he was to compose not long after he had left the West Country. Overcome with anger at the stubbornness of the ass, Peter decides to try and fling it in the river:

... when this was said
As stretched upon his side he lay,
To all the echoes south and north
And east and west the ass sent forth
A loud and horrible bray.

This outcry on the heart of Peter
Seems like a note of joy to strike;
Joy on the heart of Peter knocks,
But in the echo of the rocks
Was something Peter did not like.

Whether to cheer his coward heart
Or that he felt a wicked chain
Twined round him like a magic spell,
Upon my faith I cannot tell,
But to the work he fell again.

⁹ William Wordsworth, *Benjamin the Waggoner*, Paul F. Betz (Ed.), (New York, Cornell University Press, 1981), 70, 316-7; 78, 418-21.

Among the rock and winding crags,
 Among the mountains far away,
 Once more the ass did lengthen out
 Just like a sounding trumpet's shout
 The long dry see-saw of his horrible bray. (85-6, 496-515)

The echoes that lengthen out from this passage indicate yet again how closely Wordsworth identifies with the dissolute Peter, matching his progress to his own journey towards maturity. Nature answers back in the echo; what is required of the poet is the grace to listen. In 1799 Wordsworth's recollection of skating includes the following memory:

With the din,
 Meanwhile, the precipices rang aloud;
 The leafless trees and every icy crag
 Tinkled like iron; while the distant hills
 Into the tumult sent an alien sound
 Of melancholy, not unnoticed; while the stars,
 Eastward, were sparkling clear, and in the west
 The orange sky of evening died away.¹⁰

The 'melancholy' is 'not unnoticed'; Peter cannot help but notice that 'in the echo of the rocks' was something he 'did not like'.

Much to his horror, Peter discovers the reason for the Ass's stubbornness is that it will not leave its owner, who lies drowned in the river. Within the constantly shifting, inconstant, contradictory, ambivalent forms in which Wordsworth presents the narrative lies embedded an account of an experience which he recalled in a very different poetic guise as formative less than a year later:

The succeeding day
 There came a company, and in their boat
 Sounded with iron hooks and with long poles.
 At length the dead man, 'mid that beauteous scene
 Of trees and hills and water, bolt upright
 Rose with his ghastly face.¹¹

Peter Bell, once over the shock of finding the drowned man, does exactly the same as the searchers on Esthwaite Water described in *The Prelude*, 'he points his staff, as you'd suppose, / The river's depth to sound', and then sets to work:

He pulls, he pulls, and pulls again,

¹⁰ *The Prelude*, 5, 162-9.

¹¹ *The Prelude*, 8, 274-9.

And he whom the poor ass had lost,
 The man who had been four days dead,
 Head-foremost from the river's bed
 Uprises like a ghost. (96, 619-20; 98, 651-55)

Once he has hauled the body out, the Ass permits him to ride it, and Peter realises it is trotting homeward. Allowing the ass to go where it wishes is a formative moment for Peter in his relationship to the natural world.

Despite the narrator's constant tendency to indulge in a story that explores irrational fears and superstitious fancies, gradually the controlling power of nature imposes itself on the action, and it is the promptings of mundane events accompanying his journey that begin to endow Peter with a guilty conscience. He becomes increasingly panic stricken when he looks down from the ass's back to see that his path is marked with blood:

The dusty road is white as bone,
 And Peter casting down his eyes
 Towards the moonlight road espies
 A drop of blood upon a stone. (114, 892-5)

When he discovers a rational explanation, he discovers also that the truth is no less damning than the supernatural haunting he feared. The blood is coming from where he has been beating the ass. His relief at realising that there is a terrestrial explanation for the blood, is swiftly replaced by a sense of regret that affects him physically:

He thought – he could not help but think –
 Of that poor beast, that faithful ass,
 And once again those ugly pains
 Across his liver, heart and reins
 Just like a weaver's shuttle pass. (116, 922-5)

At length he is forced to confront the worst of his crimes, the Scottish girl he seduced, married, and abandoned:

A child was in her womb, but soon
 She droop'd and pin'd like one forlorn ...

For she had learn'd how Peter lived
 And took it in most grievous part;
 She to the very bone was worn
 And e'er that little child was born
 Died of a broken heart. (132, 1156-65)

Though Wordsworth explained to Isabella Fenwick that this story had been

told him by Ann Tyson at Hawkshead, he had arrived at Racedown haunted by the memory of Annette Vallon and her child left behind in France. With evidence provided in due course by *The Prelude*, we may assume that like Peter, he was subject to waking dreams:

Close by a brake of flowering furze
 He sees himself as plain as day;
 He sees himself, a man in figure
 Just like himself, nor less nor bigger,
 Not five yards from the broad high-way.

And stretched beneath the furze he sees
 The highland girl – it is no other –
 And hears her crying as she cried
 The very moment that she died,
 ‘My mother! Oh! my mother!’ (134, 1171-80)

Peter has already been haunted by the sound of a child crying in the distance, unaware that it is the drowned man's son searching the woods for his father:

With voice as plaintive as can be
 He sobs aloud, ‘come, come to me,
 I cannot come to you.’ (106, 763-5)

Peter's experiences of being pursued and haunted in the course of his travels are closely allied to familiar anecdotes Wordsworth recounts in *The Prelude*. Having stolen a boat on Ullswater, the sight of the ‘huge cliff’ rising unexpectedly above the horizon triggered an inexpressible fear: ‘huge and mighty forms that do not live / Like living men moved slowly through my mind / By day, and were the trouble of my dreams’. More obviously associated with guilt were the consequences of his nocturnal expeditions to rob trappers of the birds they had snared:

I heard among the solitary hills
 Low breathings coming after me, and sounds
 Of undistinguishable motion, steps
 Almost as silent as the turf they trod.

In Book X of *The Prelude* he describes a recurring dream he was no doubt still subject to after his arrival at Racedown, a dream that took him back to his days in Paris immediately before his departure for England, leaving Annette and their child to the mercy of the Revolution:

Such ghastly visions had I of despair,

And tyranny, implements of death,
 And long orations which in dreams I pleaded
 Before unjust tribunals, with a voice
 Labouring, a brain confounded, and a sense
 Of treachery and desertion in the place
 The holiest that I knew of – my own soul.¹²

Conclusion: doing the best he can

Coleridge's poetry is a recurring presence throughout *Peter Bell*, but it constitutes little more than a footnote when set alongside Wordsworth's characteristic preoccupation in *Peter Bell* with the journey he himself had made to arrive at the writing of *Lyrical Ballads*. The poem is Wordsworth's first comprehensive attempt to chronicle his journey from the disasters of his four years of travelling prior to Racedown towards his discovery of the basis for a faith in God rooted in his recognition of the restorative power of nature; this is what M. H. Abrams described as his commitment to 'Natural Supernaturalism'.¹³ His intimate friendship with Coleridge was crucial to this process; the two men seemed to have believed at this time that they were different parts of the same poet, undertaking parallel, mutually dependent voyages.

With hindsight, their eventual falling-out seems to us inevitable, but in *Peter Bell* we observe the dynamic of a creative tension that endorsed their interdependence. Above all, in this most quirky and idiosyncratic poem from a period littered with quirky, idiosyncratic, and experimental poems, *Peter Bell*, haunted by the ghosts of his dissolute life, personifies the ghostly presences who haunted Wordsworth as a child in his dreams, who were there with him in Revolutionary Paris, and who followed Peter as he toiled through the wilderness towards the cottage of the drowned man's wife. By the time Peter arrives at the house of the drowned man, his salvation has already been declared in the words of a Methodist preacher he hears as he passes by a chapel. Confronted now by the widow and children of the drowned man, it is sealed by his loss of self in the sympathy he feels for the suffering of a fellow human being. Wordsworth's all-consuming subject in *Peter Bell*, however, is the instability of his own condition as a poet, an addiction to the doubt that he never wholly managed to exorcise; in *Peter Bell*, devotees of *The Prelude* and *Tintern Abbey* might well argue that Wordsworth's sense of insecurity as a poet coupled with the trauma caused by painful personal recollections, were allowed to disrupt his aesthetic judgement. In fact, the poem is probably best understood as a work bench, used by its author to grapple with—while working at considerable haste—the plethora of possibilities for a new poetry that he was

¹² *The Prelude*, 4, 127-9; 2, 46-9; 378, 374-80.

¹³ M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1971). Abrams writes: '... my recurrent ... concern will be the secularization of inherited theological ideas and ways of thinking', adding 'Secular thinkers have no more been able to work free of the centuries-old Judeo-Christian culture than Christian theologians were able to work free of their inheritance of classical and pagan thought.' (12-13)

exploring with Coleridge. Prompted by the turbulent, nomadic nature of his life leading up to his arrival at Racedown, Wordsworth combined that search for a new poetry with a restlessly autobiographical habit of introspection.

It is in this respect that *Peter Bell* constitutes a major work worthy of serious attention. In other respects it remains a poem of which even the most well-disposed readers of Wordsworth might reasonably be expected to despair, not least when we eventually arrive at the final stanza:

And Peter Bell, who till that night
Had been the wildest of his clan,
Forsook his crimes, forsook his folly,
And after ten months melancholy
Became a good and honest man. (152, 1376-80)

The explanation for the trite, obtuse precision of those 'ten months' is in fact very simple, but all too easily overlooked. This is a poem for whom Wordsworth has created an incompetent, dithering narrator who is anxious to confess—as we have heard—his feelings of unworthiness for his task ('I'll do the best I can'). Sadly, this turns out to be the best he can manage when it comes, at long last, to finding a concluding verse for his tale. We might even imagine that the poet (who could surely have done better) was smirking in the manner described by Hazlitt as he read his narrator's lines to his assembled listeners beneath the trees of Alfoxden.

What Wordsworth is experimenting with here—and in *Peter Bell* we see the component parts of his experiment laid out for inspection—is a technique he was to use with remarkable success in 'The Thorn'. Surely no proficient reader of Wordsworth still complains that the banality of the narrator's observation of the patch of moss by the thorn tree ruins the poem: 'I've measured it from side to side: / 'Tis three feet long, and two feet wide'. (78, 32-3) The narrator is an old, gossipy, retired sailor; his appetite for Gothic sensationalism dulls his sensitivity to Martha Ray's condition, enabling Wordsworth to dramatize all the more poignantly the harsh social, existential cause of her desperate condition. Turning to the 1800 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, we recognise that the narrator here is the product of a society in which a sensationalist press, combined with 'frantic novels' and 'sickly and stupid German Tragedies', are 'acting with a combined force to blunt the discriminating powers of the mind.' The narrator of 'The Thorn' has mistakenly come to rely on 'action and situation' to give importance to the 'feeling'; he suffers from a 'degrading thirst after outrageous stimulation' and in consequence would certainly have opted for a trip in the moon boat described by the equally unreconstructed narrator of *Peter Bell* (746-7, 148-78). These narrators are of the same ilk as many of those to be found in *Lyrical Ballads*: the thoughtless young people who offer a facile judgment on the desperately ill man fishing in the lake described in the fourth poem of the 'Poems on the Naming of Places' series (247-50); the opinionated adult who bullies the child in 'Anecdote for Fathers' (71-3) and again in 'We

are Seven' (73-5), and the supercilious narrator of 'Simon Lee', who at the end of that poem is shocked into the first stages of a societal understanding of the wretched condition of the old huntsman and his wife.

I've of hearts unkind, kind deeds
With coldness still returning.
Alas! The gratitude of men
Has oftner left me mourning. (67, 101-4)

The final stanza of *Peter Bell* (along with a good many others in the poem) was part of an experiment that made the revolutionary subtlety of the published poetry possible.