

Reading *The Ancient Mariner* and *Peter Bell*

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THREE WEEKS AFTER RETURNING FROM THE VALLEY OF THE ROCKS, Wordsworth Dorothy and Coleridge, on November 12 1797, set out along the coast as the late-afternoon light was fading.¹ The two men were soon planning to write a ballad for the progressive *Monthly Magazine* established the year before. Its first issue had lamented that sublimity seemed beyond the grasp of modern bards. This was a provocation to the two such ambitious young men who also needed to earn a helpful £5 from a ballad if they could. It was Wordsworth who supplied the essential idea of a crime committed attracting spectral punishment, to include killing an albatross, the return of the ghostly crew to work the ropes of the stricken ship and the Tutelary Polar Spirit. Wordsworth is known to have contributed at least 6 lines to *The Ancient Mariner* and perhaps four or five more remain unidentified.

The early months of 1798 when Coleridge was occupied with “Frost at Midnight” and *Christabel* is the time of the closest simultaneity of voice between the two poets. By March, Wordsworth was writing about a long poem to be called *The Recluse* and mentions 1300 lines had already composed. The “Discharged Soldier” was one of the first fragments Wordsworth began working on after he withdrew from collaborating on Coleridge’s ballad and some critics think this is the poem which most acutely engages with *The Ancient Mariner*. If it does so engage with Coleridge’s Mariner poem it doesn’t employ the same literary means while *Peter Bell* can claim to do exactly that.

On 23 March Coleridge walked to Alfoxden to read to his friends the completed Mariner ballad. William and Dorothy might well have accompanied Coleridge part of the way home on that recorded fine moonlit night, and this is a possible moment for the genesis of “the little boat,/ In shape just like the crescent moon” in the incongruous but intensely experimental opening of *Peter Bell*. We know *Peter Bell* was definitely begun by the 20th April. Wordsworth wrote fast and within a month the tale of the itinerant potter was in a state to be read to visitors, among them Hazlitt. Wordsworth had begun his long narrative poem in a much plainer style than the self-conscious “elder” style of *The Ancient Mariner*. *Peter Bell* runs to more than 1000 lines as against the Mariner’s 658. This may be one reason why it never featured in *Lyrical Ballads*, though it’s likely to have been more complicated than that, and we know Wordsworth at one stage did envisage his Potter joining the other *Lyrical Ballads* characters. His outlandish tale was inspired by a story read in a newspaper: a donkey had been found beside a canal hanging its head over the floating body of its drowned master. Wordsworth loved watching the donkeys among the woods at Alfoxden. *Peter Bell* came from the character of a wild

¹ Given as an informal talk at the Coleridge Study Weekend, September 2015. Contextual information and matters of broad interpretation are indebted to familiar insights by John Beer, Mary Jacobus, John Jordan, Paul Magnuson and John Williams and can be readily traced. Most of the close or comparative reading of the two poems is my own.

rover who had accompanied Wordsworth along the banks of the Wye almost as far as Hay in the summer of 1793: "He told me strange stories. It has always been a pleasure to me... to catch at every opportunity... in my rambles of becoming acquainted with this class of people". In MS 2 of the ballad, the narrator recollects his actual meeting with the rover whom he named Peter Bell after a Hawkeshead classmate: "Now Peter do I call to mind / That eventide when thou and I / Over ditch and over stile/ Were fellow travellers many a mile / Near Bualth [sic] on the banks of Wye". Six MSS have survived, plus textual variants after 1819. MS 3 from the early summer of 1800 is the first extant virtually complete version, though the earlier drafts don't suggest a poem substantially different, but we don't have the exact version Wordsworth read to Hazlitt at Alfoxden.

In 1790s the fashion in magazine writing for the literary ballad with vivid story line and character was at its height, though often little more than the uncanny wrapped in a fake antiquarianism. Burger's ballads had been first collected in German in 1779 (Wordsworth bought his own copy when he arrived at Hamburg) and his influence reached England in the 1790s with a flurry of translations and imitations. Burger's most famous work was the ballad "Lenore" (William Taylor's translation had appeared in the *Monthly Magazine*). Burger's initial attempts at themes of ballad had been jocose, aiming to keep one step ahead of embarrassment, but soon became seduced by the compulsive material he had playfully invoked: the ballad revival became a reality sweeping all before it. There are strong echoes of Burger in "The Idiot Boy" where verbal patterns derived directly from "Lenore" reverberate in the midnight ride. "The Lass of Fair Wone" (again in William Taylor's translation) leaves its mark on "The Thorn", though a narrator is added as a way of modifying the raw ballad material and infanticide is reduced to hearsay. An increasing role for the narrator is one of the ways Coleridge and Wordsworth do lyrically modify the inheritance of Burger.

Wordsworth noted Burger provoked a "flurry of pleasure" but "no recollection of delicate or minute feelings" and no delineation of character". Wordsworth, by the time he reached Germany, had come to dislike Burger's poetry as being too self-dramatic: "I see everywhere the character of Burger himself" (was this a foretaste of his later reservations about *The Ancient Mariner*?). Both poets, however, did find accelerated ballad tragedies rendered lyrical through sheer metrical impulse irresistible. Such were the starting points for *The Ancient Mariner* and *Peter Bell*.

In the traditional ballad there were few portraits of humble people in ordinary life, but what attracted Coleridge and Wordsworth to the form was an elemental quality which they sensed had a potential for music, magic and symbolism, something highly marketable but which they could enrich and deepen. How much distance from the popular ballad should each poet take? Here were emergent tensions: Coleridge transformed the absorptive trance-like power of the ballad but left much of its effect intact while Wordsworth worked with a more blatant semi-doggerel and humble subject matter (though varied

his stanza forms, something he saw the need for having heard *The Ancient Mariner* read).

Both poems narrate journeys either into the unknown or with an irreversible outcome. The Wedding Guest at first thinks the Mariner's tale might contribute to the feast: "Nay, if thou'st got a laughsome tale, / Marinere! Come with me" (11-12). Both ballads begin with the possibility of being entertaining, even though "laughsome" hints at contempt and resistance. *Peter Bell* as it cranks itself up before an audience begins as a "laughsome" tale, an untoward entertainment, but we soon learn the Mariner's history will be anything but that. And the recitation of *Peter Bell* will also take its voluble audience into regions they never expected to be lured into. What is the status of these recounted journeys which, to begin with, are simple ballad jaunts for the curious? It is for us to decide whether these are simply incongruous journeys without return or whether they contain elements of a rite of passage or even of pilgrimage.

Coleridge's sheer imaginative fluency is borrowed gleefully in the Prologue to *Peter Bell* where the story-teller invokes the "little boat / In shape just like the crescent moon". The moon-boat offers a seductively alternative fairy vision (hinting at the world of *Christabel* or "The Eolian Harp") but the narrator grows homesick once he sees the town where he was born. The boat goes on challenging the poet to more "wild delights" and something of this sticks when the picture of potter and ass eventually seem a pair "Come from some region of the air, / Some unknown region of their own" (854-5). The Mariner too, as the crew begin to pull on the ropes tells himself "I am as thin as air— / They cannot me behold" (377). This airy nothingness partly drives narrative as such, so that in *Peter Bell*, after many grim sights, the poet can still claim "I've play'd, I've danc'd with my narration, / A happy and a thoughtless man" (981-2): some burden has been lifted from the narration to allow it to pass through these horrors unalarmed. The quasi-parodic nature of modern ballad, however experimental in aim, resurfaces. There is also a hint of perichoresis, the cosmic dance, as in *The Ancient Mariner* when, shortly after the vision of the water-snakes, "to and fro and in and out / The stars dance on between" (308-9). When the Potter is finally guided by the ass to the widow of its drowned master, "in the best way that he could / His tale did Peter tell" (1269-70) which is like a motto for the ballad as a whole. It is, however, a "woeful agony, / Which forc'd me to begin my tale" that instigates the Mariner's tale first told to the hermit, though "then it left me free" (611-14) but time cannot so be appeased. His history refuses to intervene as a timely utterance, it instructs but it is restlessly inexhaustible rather than self-renewing or healing.

The Ancient Mariner voyages across seas, across changing or deceptive boundaries and in *Peter Bell* "The woods, my friends, are round you roaring, / The woods are roaring like a sea" (11). The Squire complains that the audience feels adrift in the tale that hasn't properly launched itself: "Sure as Paradise / Was lost to us by Adam's sinning / We are all wandering in a wood" (166-7). The wood has mislaid narrative connection, the tale seems adrift in the midst

of itself, the audience sense the outskirts of Dante's *Inferno*. And the Potter himself will cry out, having found his short-cut interminable and the path lost: "No doubt I'm foundered in these woods" (381). In *The Ancient Mariner* by contrast, once the Polar spirit leads on the stricken ship, a hidden brook "Singeth a quiet tune" "to the sleeping woods all night" (360). The hermit also "singeth loud his godly hymns / That he makes in the wood" (543-4). In the Mariner's history a wood is a shelter and partakes of the consolation of shore, but in *Peter Bell* a wood is more often threatening and pathless.

"But nature ne'er could find the way / Into the heart of Peter Bell" (214), which is to imply Nature and the heart can only be connected by way of a passage suggesting the necessity of journeying. Peter and Nature "Had often been together" so there *is* external closeness "Though Nature ne'er could touch his heart" (261). This man has "fixed his face / In many a solitary place" (293-4), his eye as stony in its stare as the ones the crew fix on the Mariner. And when the little boy, child of the drowned ass-owner, looking for his father sobs "come, come to me, / I cannot come to you" (764-5) we sense here something of Nature's own cry for response and sensitivity but which must begin from Peter's own inner world outwards.

Many critics take the ending of *The Ancient Mariner* as little short of travesty, a tame closing piety, but here we do have, as the Mariner dreams of walking in fellowship to the Kirk, a skeletal account of purging the obsessive narration itself. The Mariner's history can never be exhaustively lived through but the narration itself can rest awhile and become a voyage dreaming of pilgrimage. The Mariner yearns not just for the Kirk but for the spontaneous ritual of walking towards it, while *Peter Bell* is a voyage *into* pilgrimage, more processional with a suggestion of Christ on the traditional ass in the entry to Jerusalem. Peter's snatched ride becomes a rite of passage (there is an explicit reference to Christ in MS 6). In *The Ancient Mariner* the albatross comes to perch for "vespers nine" (74) on the ship's cross-like mast opening a space for ritual and not just a ship's logbook period of time. Obsessive elements persist, however: the Potter "cannot chuse but look" when he sees the drowned man in the flood, just as the Wedding Guest cannot choose but hear the tale of the Mariner (558).

"By the moonlight river side / It gave three miserable groans" (156-7). In these words the tale of the Potter attempts to get underway, but "it" is not a preternatural happening, ghost or spectre but an ass. Wordsworth, tongue in cheek, is obliquely referring to Coleridge's "To a Young Ass" roundly lampooned in the *Anti-Jacobin*: ("Poor Ass! Her Master should have learnt to shew / Pity—best taught by fellowship of woe!"), lines Wordsworth himself could have written or might have known prior to meeting Coleridge.

Peter Bell is in the tradition of wondering solitaires like the Pedlar or even the "Old Man Travelling", but distinguished from these others by his wicked treatment of women and animals. He has already killed his dog Ruffian and rains down blows on the ass as if it were a dog: "you little mulish dog" he cries when his first whippings have no effect. We don't know why Peter killed his

dog but it seems another unmotivated crime, unless Peter's blind rage is ultimately more salvific than the Mariner's seeming indifference. The albatross came to the Mariner's "hollo" "every day for food or play" (70). Is it this element of play as a sort of sub- or rogue ritual which becomes the precedent for a motiveless shooting, though one that will deprive the Mariner of any further spiritual nurture? Within the ballad, play has the capacity to undercut inner intention and become pure outer event with inescapable spiritual repercussions.

In *Peter Bell* we are told the Potter is travelling without the lurcher who loves him well: the Potter has to travel alone to encounter his transformation (311-15). His real conversion comes after he has found the drowned man and continues on the ass's back like a swooning man recalling his dog as "A faithful beast like this poor ass... Made by the God who made us all / And fitter far to live than I". It is the fidelity of dog and ass sharing their lives with Peter that allows him to go on living, so that he isn't frozen into becoming fixated on a death in life.

At the outset of his tale, Peter personifies the unredeemed aspect of nature itself and all the unfeeling brutality of the natural world exposed in *Salisbury Plain* and in the *Ruined Cottage*. One haunting detail in *Peter Bell* is the way the ass pivots its ear (observed from life by Wordsworth in the woods near Alfoxden): "Only the ass, with motion dull / Upon the pivot of his skull / Turns round his long left ear" (448). The ass otherwise shows almost no vitality but its presence announces this strange metanoia, or a capacity to turn about. And the moment Peter sees the ass and thinks to make use of it he also thinks of wisely turning back on himself: "For once, quoth he, I will be wise; / Upon my faith, I'll back again, / And not to make my journey vain / I'll take the ass likewise"(381-5). Even though no more than worldly-wise at this point, his words prophesy more than he can understand about what it means to take the ass along with him.

The ass reveals itself as strangely other, especially when it challenges Peter's observational control by calmly observing him in turn. The ass "Looked quietly in his face" (420) as the Potter leaps on its back. This silence reminds Peter that a face can be expressive, and that he too might come to possess "faciality", or sense the power to invite an ethical response, an I / Thou type of relation. Both ass and albatross beckon towards the sacred albeit from across a wild, deserted terrain. Peter will come to perceive the ass as alive once having come face-to-face with the dead swollen body of its master and then notices "the poor ass was gaunt and lean / And almost wasted to the bone" (669-70), the very bones he had so recently been striking at. In *The Ancient Mariner* the dead crew fix their eyes on the Mariner but here all faciality is paralysed, his fellows have become obstinate moving objects which gaze on him but do not regard him: "All fix'd on me their stony eyes / That in the moon did glitter"(441-2). They glitter because these eyes can absorb no light themselves.

Peter Bell almost certainly didn't begin as a retort to *The Ancient Mariner*. Wordsworth would have felt less inspired than his friend in that regard.

Coleridge's ballad, in its turn, reappropriates echoes of *Salisbury Plain*—which involves a sailor—and the “Discharged Soldier” involves a mariner-like figure even before work on the Mariner is complete. The soldier is “long and lank” like Wordsworth's own line provided to describe Coleridge's Mariner. Much of the plan for ballad collaboration comes from *Salisbury Plain* when Wordsworth's sailor arrives at the dead house on the plain: “Till then as if his terror dogged his road / He fled and often backward cast his face” (127-8) which pre-echo the better-known lines: “Because he knows, a frightful fiend / Doth close behind him tread” (455-6). *Peter Bell* has its own Coleridgean echoes: “I know a deep romantic land... and in the farthest heart it lies / Of deepest Africa” (91-5) the Preface declares, perhaps alluding to “Kubla Khan's” “deep romantic chasm”. The Swale like the Alph is an underground river, going “under the green rocks”.

There is a rather Faust-like episode in Part 3 of Wordsworth's ballad, where a pious man reading finds his taper tracing uncanny letters on the paper of his book: “The wondrous word which thus he saw / Did never from his lips depart” (946-7); this word brings unknown sins to light “Out of the bottom of his heart”. Here we seem at the core of a Coleridgean imaginative effect. Then there is a sudden swerve: “Let good men feel the soul of Nature / And see things as they are” (954-5). At this stage in Wordsworth's imaginary, however, good men might only become purified by passing through an uncanny landscape integrally haunted by such esoteric mottos.

In both poems, the moon has a distinctive role but is an unstable image which we don't quite know how to read but from which flows a further implication, further levels of consequence. *Peter Bell* as a possible narrative revolves around its own crescent moon as the tale begins to gather momentum in the Preface. When Peter can get no reaction out of the ass he wants to ride, he fears “There is some plot against me laid” though he can see nothing that jars with his purpose, “Only the full moon's in the sky / And with her a fair company, / The fairest of the stars” (443-5). But the same “moon uneasy look'd and dimmer” once the ass emits a long dry bray (511-20): purposes may now be changing. But when the Potter wakes from his swoon beside the body in the river there are “glimmerings of the moon” and he finds he is not in hell (592). Once he becomes seriously troubled by his own inner fiends, Peter on the ass's back feels his swoon return, like a ghost or one “Whose face, if any such there be, / Is like the eyeless moon” (1071-5). The “hornéd moon” (202) in *The Ancient Mariner* knows something of a “fair company” and contains a bright star between its tips as the spectre ship disappears. While “The moving moon” goes up the sky “And no where did abide” (256) there is a star or two beside as “Softly she was going up” (256) which suggests partial relief from the “curse in a dead man's eye” (251) even though “Her beams bemock the sultry main” (259); given the instability of image, however, the moon as such isn't wholly identified with the continuing effect of her beams. As the ship drifts towards the harbour-bar, moonlight lies on the bay, but also “the shadow of the moon” (480) which reminds us the moon is a secondary light, a light which

also obscures the sun, and of course the Mariner's flesh is still "red as in a glare" (487). While the bay is white and silent, perhaps innocent of event and narration as yet, the prow of the ship has crimson shadows, marked by too direct an encounter with the sun with its invitation to strike out regardless and unregarded (511-2).

Peter the Potter can be haunted by something still more nondescript: "The very leaves they follow me, / So huge hath been my wickedness" (874-5) and this leads to uncanny drops of blood upon a stone seen on the moonlit road (894-5): "wounds will bleed, we know, / ... But yet the leaf he can't deny, / It dogg'd him" (996-9). When the Hermit sees the sere sails of the Mariner's ship, he likens them to "skeletons of leaves that lag / My forest brook along" (466-7). In *The Ancient Mariner* the moon glitters on the stony eyes of the crew as they stand together on the deck (440-1, cf 496). The devilry in Peter's curses matures to a deeper sense of the demonic: "Poor Peter by an ugly fiend / Is troubled more and more; quoth he, / I know the truth, I know it well, / Through meadow-ground and rock and dell / A devil is following me" (1051-5). Unlike *The Ancient Mariner*, the demonic pursuit is not through a desert but through apparently homely, sheltering scenes. Earlier, the miners' underground blasting had created a turning-point of mock-apocalypse when ground is shaken literally and so taken from under Peter's feet, recalling the apocalyptic thunder at the time of Christ's crucifixion. In *The Ancient Mariner*, once the ship is in the harbour and the hermit's boat is approaching, a rumbling sound from underneath splits the ship and sinks it so that "The ship went down like lead" 582). Was it the noise of lead-mining Peter heard, we might wonder, but he remains on the surface, though as listeners and readers we never quite surface from the Mariner's tale. Once Peter can identify where the blood comes from, the ass's head, he glimpses a sudden joy which is more than relief, but connection with another living thing, though as such, it becomes immediately painful again (919-20). Blood can be redemptive for the Mariner too, as when he tells us "I bit my arm and suck'd the blood / And cry'd, A sail! a sail!" (152-3). The crew "as they were drinking all" "for joy did grin" (156) and the ass can also grin: "The quiet creature made a pause. / Turn'd round his head and grinn'd" (1024-5). For Peter, however, an ass's grin can be uglier than sin and death and all the devils together as it reminds him of his own inner darkness.

There are the two journeys of the Mariner—an outer one of physical isolation, and an inner one of guilt, and alienation, which confront the existential reality of humanity, or what it is like to be human or not. Peter Bell too only knows a deprived existence, though not self-rejecting as such but he is unable to accept his life in terms of any meaningful relations, human or non-human. The Mariner's crime against a bird and his subsequent punishment by homeless voyaging fits the crime in terms of ballad justice where no further explanations are needed—empty action clinches burdened outcome.

If the Mariner witnesses to a Christ who takes no pity on a soul in agony, that is what is meant by agony (226). Is this because the agony is over-realised,

a form of self-enclosure not so far from Peter Bell's own obduracy and so makes impossible or delays any internal reconciliation? Later, the Mariner knows himself to be "the man" "By him who died on cross, / With his cruel bow he lay'd full low / The harmless Albatross" (403-6). We can't overlook the hint that the bow was a cross-bow and so Christ is at once blasphemed against and implicated. This leads on to a suspension of damnation but equally a deferment of redemption: "the man hath penance done, / And penance more will do" (413-4). It is possible to shift a little the headlong "ballad justice" but never finally escape the arbitrariness of event and responsibility. It is the shooting of the bird which gives rise to a whole train of emotional implication here and not the other way round.

Fate is also caprice, the Mariner is both condemned and privileged to be able to tell his tale. The poem's derided conclusion may contain banal apothegms but the moral has meaning as having been lived. The Procession to the Kirk is an aspiration towards a life of ritual beyond event or narration where the tale is subsumed in sacred history. Is the procession itself a "dream of joy!" with which the Mariner hails his own countrée but which he hesitates to feel welcomed by (469). The vesper-bell that bids the Mariner to prayer (628-9) sounds out against the din of the wedding-feast but perhaps is another hallucination, though one calling to a populated ritual, and shared silence. In the desert of the wide seas "God himself / scarce seemed there to be" (631-2) as if there are places that exist beyond divine presence. The walk to the Kirk might be another hollow seeming but this time one of presence itself, a "there" which can welcome some divine consolation where "all together pray" in a ritual which lightens the burden of excessive, not wholly livable, experience. Here youths and maidens gay (641) contrast with the wedding feast which appears a dubious riot of passage rather than a rite in its own terms. As the Mariner gives his farewell, he gestures at blessing the Wedding Guest by commending kindness to all living things, though it is a prayer seemingly too late (while Peter Bell *is* in time, or makes time, for his redemption).

In Peter Bell redemption is restated in emphatically humane terms, as against the non-achievement of any supernatural redemption in *The Ancient Mariner*. There, salvation is glimpsed as a hope in spiritual ritual and practice, but is not fully imaginable. We don't hear of anything similar for the Potter once he has abandoned his former ways. In Coleridge's ballad, a non-realisation dreams, despite all, of a sustaining after-life; in Wordsworth's poem a decisive encounter has no apparent aftermath in terms of specific ritual practice. Peter disappears back into himself (though a different self) while the Mariner remains imprisoned within his experience while aspiring to a purer self which he is able to specify though probably never fully choose. For Coleridge, vision will never let its protagonist be; with Wordsworth the work of imagination is over and the Potter is left to take up his own now healed life again. Peter will understand for himself what that healing will entail. Immediately after being moved by the fidelity of his dog and ass, Peter remembers the Highland Girl who disastrously followed him, though "To Kirk

she had been us'd to go / Twice every Sabbath day" (1149-50). She is described subsequently as worn "to the very bone" as a symbol of Peter's abuse which in his memory (though still on the ass's back) he sees "as ugly images / As ever eye did see in hell" (1169-70). The ass takes Peter further until they hear a pious Methodist: "Repent, repent, he cries aloud, / God is a God of mercy", so "save your souls alive" (1196-1200)—that final word "alive" is so typical of Wordsworth in suggesting salvation conjoins a life both human and natural. The Mariner does save his own soul but in the process seems no longer fully alive, though this is expressed as hyper-consciousness rather than tranquillity. Once Peter's tears come, he is offered something like complete forgiveness as an animal: "And all the animal within / Was weak, perhaps, but it was mild / And gentle as an infant child, / An infant that has known no sin" (1217-1220). Wordsworth here portrays the full dynamics of a resurrection experience which the Mariner could only glimpse as aspiration: "And now does Peter feel / The heart of man's a holy thing, / And Nature through a world of death / Breathes into him a second breath / Just like the breath of spring" (1311-15). This new breath makes Peter long to comfort the widow and press her to his heart. "At last as from a trance he wakes" (1335) and is now standing "in the clear moonshine"—an awakening which the Mariner never achieves except in the glimmer of spiritual aspiration he is visited by after passing his tale to a new listener. The Mariner has less sheer animality to fall back on under his burden of symbolic experience; he cannot, after all, ever fly on the albatross as Peter rides his ass. Peter Bell is able to forsake his crimes and they do forsake him, in a way the Mariner's crimes in their more uncanny narrative never do. The Potter is not left a sadder and a wiser man but "after ten month's melancholy / Became a good and honest man" (1378-80). He can achieve a work of mourning and leave melancholy behind (as the Mariner might if he did actually walk to the kirk). We don't know whether he ever does, or whether he has compulsively to seek another listener, whether that "uncertain hour" that haunts him is here "offtimes or now fewer" (615-6). Peter Bell's 10 months date a passage through temporality and so an achieved pilgrimage, after which he can take up a common life that needs no further narrative.

Wordsworth, in an often ungainly poem, achieves redemption for Peter through a poetic drive that is its own sufficient living, ethical force. Coleridge chooses not to shake off a deathly sense of the uncanny but simultaneously gestures more nakedly towards realms of redemption beyond experience and sensation, as his poem ends with the uncontainable impulse towards voyage offered the dimensions of pilgrimage but not to be achieved directly within the space of his poetic narration itself.