TINTERN ABBEY, ONCE AGAIN

J. H. Prynne

Much has been written about this central composition of Wordsworth's most germinal phase in the ordering of his inward and outward modes of experience. Many features of its rhetorical and incremental structure have been analysed, in convincing fine detail; as also the circumstances of its composition, its place in the mutations of meditative georgic pastoral, and its supposed literary and other sources. Also there has been much discussion of the prominent thematic omissions from this poem, at least on a surface level: the absence for example of the Revolution in France and of Tintern Abbey itself, and the by some presumed anxiety of these omissions. These comments here have the more local purpose initially of drawing attention to a feature of the opening verse paragraph, as it 'sets the scene', or rather two scenes, for the thoughts which are to ensue.

> Five years have passed; five summers, with the length
> Of five long winters! and again I hear
> These waters, rolling from their mountain-springs
> With a soft inland murmur.*–Once again
> Do I behold these steep and lofty cliffs,
> Which on a wild secluded scene impress
> Thoughts of more deep seclusion; and connect
> The landscape with the quiet of the sky.
>
> * The river is not affected by the tides a few miles

The double setting has been often remarked; Wordsworth has a remembered prospect lodged deep in recollection's inward eye, while his present gaze scans the visible outlook for the prompt of matching forms: nourishing, sustaining, confirming.

A specific technical aspect of this doubling is the repetition of vocabulary forms, words that interweave a dense pattern of recurrence within and through this section of the poem and figure thereafter as more intermittent threads through the sections which follow. There are prominent markers for the start of these overlays: the 'five years' which split into 'five summers' and their five long counterpart winters. The present visit is made 'again' after this double interval, part-clement and part-forbidding, and 'again' is a marker word which is itself repeated, so that these linked doublings establish a rhythm not dissimilar to the rhetorical patterns of the renaissance handbooks, or the looping journeys of a tour of visitations. By like token, what is first wildly green is later how the green runs wild, over-running the order whose boundaries it marks, and the trees and copses which are of this simple green hue are then inclusively part of a more extended green landscape, seen initially from within the leafy shade of a darker tree closer by.

Hidden repeats confirm these echoes; the vagrants who do not have settled resources to harvest and seasoned wood for burning must make fire from green boughs and thus produce the visible tributary smoke which in likelihood marks out their transient sites; or if the smoke comes in fact from the hermit's fire then this smoke too will be of human but undomesticated origin. Likewise the orchard trees which, past blossom and before the colour of ripening fruit (we are after all in mid-July), shew the same overall green hue as the rest of the woodland cover, repeated in the sportive woods of hedgerows, themselves repeated as not quite what they

seem, running in lines back and forth as the lines announced initially in the opening title to the poem. The observing eye could not at this distance know a fruiting tree from its 'wild' counterpart, unless a previous visit at a different season had discerned and registered the difference. The landscape, its variations of nature and nurture, is thus read as well as seen.

Yet more latently the sound of mountain springs, not directly audible from this somewhat lower and lusher valley scene, has already broadened into a rolling motion within the mind's ear, described as specifically inland because the rollers suggest a more distant and mighty sea towards which these flows, soon to become tidal, have their convergent tendency, as indeed they explicitly do in the ninth section of the 'Immortality Ode'; a not unrelated motion, shifted into the domain of spirit, will later in the Tintern Abbey poem impel and roll through the totality of all things. By comparable latency, 'murmur' contains its own repeat within the duplication of its word-form, and when actually repeated its later hint of diminished presence is adjusted by gifted recompense; the promise in 'murmur' is not distinct, and so shortfall may be made up by transferred powers of presence, less direct but more abundant and profound.

A related overlay of large and small scales is announced in the miniature 'tufts', their remoteness forming part of the deeper connection between visible landscape and the quiet of the sky; they represent the inferred reality of full-grown trees but, seen from a distant eminence some fair way above the scene itself, reduce playfully to toy-like forms, as the hedge-rows also play at being woods with their imitation of grown-up trees allowed their sweet liberty; the orchard-tufts and hedges present their own parallel flushes of childhood, all of these forms of growth performing for the observer an inferred return to his own youth now already a good way behind him. We may recall a similar implicative richness in Coleridge's 'Frost at Midnight', composed five months earlier, in which the 'tufts of snow' of the apple-tree's bare wintry branch lodged themselves upon the puckerings of bark around the dormant leaf-buds, and portended by miniature snowy imitation what would later be the vernal green foliage to sprout from just those same germinal nubs. The pattern of insistent, passionate repetition is present in both Wordsworth's and Coleridge's poems, as instanced in the iterative formula 'how oft…how oft', with the lapping sound-plays across 'oft/soft/tuft' and the dispersed presence of 'oft' and 'soft' within the letters of 'frost' itself.

> These hedge-rows, hardly hedge-rows, little lines
> Of sportive wood run wild; 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.

This quiet of the sky above Tintern is outwardly the consequence of the distance of the scene from the observer, too far for busy sound to travel, which also accounts for the silence of the smoke rising from the unseen fires of the vagrants or of the solitary hermit; but inwardly the human emptiness of the sky canopy absorbs and locates this silence as of consciousness itself, so that only the soft inland murmur crosses the divide, as if directly counterpart to the fluent susurrus of feeling and reflection within the mind. Even the hermit figure, a more solemn variant of the vagrants (gypsies, we may suppose), who provides station within the prospect for these contemplative thoughts which fathom its deeper seclusion, is twice named, as the owner of his own cave. Descriptively he is no more than fancied presence, but his cave, like Plato's, holds the implicit focus for crossings between nature and spirit, the objects of perception and images of memory and love. The abbey at Tintern must in a more devout age have served to express and celebrate such a focus; its absence from the scene here except as an inferred and half-ruined landmark may betoken the general omission of any

formal shrine, in contrast to the more ecclesiastical *habitus* of Wordsworth's later work. This absence maybe also raises a more profoundly unspoken question, which is the relation of a living spiritual presence, paired within nature and the human mind, to the specific providential direction a of a Godhead not reducible to a pantheistic sublime: which Coleridge in 1795-7 had somewhat recklessly called 'the one life, within us and abroad, / Which meets all motion, and becomes its soul' ('The Eolian Harp'). Meanwhile untroubled by theological dilemmas, each of these cottage-plots and pastoral farms comprises instead a mute stationing of hearth and domestic occupation, their own more modest blend of nature and spirit in human presence. The purposeful reclusion of the hermit, separated like the poet from this domesticity all around him even as seeking to divine its higher spirit, also prompts acknowledgment of a difference between a visit (which might be partly the accident of its occasion, as in gypsy wanderings) and a *re*-visit (which bears the mark of full deliberateness).

For twenty three lines all of this opening section displays a marked frequency of significant word-repeats, made notable by the many ways in which these usages slip back and forth between inner and outer, between seeing and recognising, apprehending a known form through the prompting cue of its recurrence. The 'wild green landscape' in particular is made up of three descriptor words which are, all three, items in the list of repeats; the mind notices the wildness of natural disorder as containing the latent fruits of patient nurture, running to wildness as up to the very door and threshold of purposeful indwelling; even the houseless vagrants mimic this settlement by their temporary encampments. The view of 'these' hedge-rows runs with the general greenness to connect directly with 'these' pastoral farms, made pastoral by the greenness which nourishes their purpose to nourish into cultivation the fruitfulness of natural growth. 'The day is come' announces the appointed due moment as if by almost biblical fulfillment of a tryst or prophecy; all the eight pointing gestures with 'these' and 'this' confirm by their incremental cadences, as proxy for the reader, the focus of viewpoint and visible scene: the steadily intensified here and now of where we are.

> The day is come when I again repose
> Here, under this dark sycamore, and view
> These plots of cottage-ground, these orchard tufts,
> Which, at this season, with their unripe fruits,
> Among the woods and copses lose themselves,
> Nor, with their green and simple hue, disturb
> The wild green landscape. Once again I see

Such variability within the landscape, however, could threaten to unsettle by erosion or encroachment of forms, leading to loss of continuity in the life of remembrance; the pleasures of instant diversity were what characterised, and weakened, the prospect-poem of earlier tradition. But the latent threads of connection here, across the contrasts of 'uncertain notice', hold the links in place: 'wild green landscape' will not be disturbed by these interplays, since its component lexical markers are each stabilised in close proximity elsewhere; or if indeed disturbed, then brought thus to record feelings and perceptions reconnected in due time as with the joy of elevated thoughts. Nothing slips into a mere margin of attention. In such ways, reciprocal passage is possible between the old and the new, the wild and the stable, and this passage becomes itself nourishing to consciousness. The underlying theme of continued identity is performed, I suggest, by the repeats of identical words, making a cognate vocabulary out of memory that shall be a vocabulary for acts of remembering, leading (in other words and the same words too) into cumulative instances of recognition. To recognise is to confirm by second looks, and to experience why such recognition may move the soul is to feel each just pleasure in confirming a hunger for acknowledgment which, until thus confirmed, might have never been admitted or even registered.

The central field of strangeness, become familiar while still playfully distinct, gives a delicate blissful sport across the surface of this opening narrative, such as can mask the sensible reserve of emotion while following out the meaning of what this sport covers and thus reveals. Each contour is deepened by revisiting echo and acknowledgment, by the words which strike and open their chords. The effect is too delicate to be constructed, too rich to be accidental.

The afterlife of the 'wild green landscape' within the poem's ensuing later sections is transferred through subsequent recurrence from sensation to emotion, not without danger from fear and grief, and thereby to stabilizing constancy in recognition and in love. The shifts in reference of 'deep' through the whole sequence map out these exemplary powers of transfer: deep seclusion, deep power of joy, deep rivers, the deep and gloomy wood, something far more deeply interfused, deeper zeal; the natural feeds the emotional and metaphysical with the perspectives of focus and cumulative intensity, just as the metaphysical donates to the natural its reciprocating ardency of regard for natural occasions and their perceptible forms of local being. These interchanges were acknowledged by Wordsworth himself: in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (in a passage added in 1850) he speaks of 'the general passions and thoughts and feelings of men' as the poet describes them, and their connections 'with our moral sentiments and animal sensations, and with the causes which excite these; with the operations of the elements, and the appearances of the visible universe; with storm and sunshine, with cold and heat, with loss of friends and kindred, with injuries and resentments, gratitude and hope, with fear and sorrow.' What is general in passion, as well as specific, is mediated by the recognition of transfer and the truth in likeness; essentially, the understanding through recurrence of recurrence itself.

The wildness of errant natural forms is thus found reflected by anticipation and recovery in the wild eyes of the narrator's sister and dearest friend, and in her wild moments of solitude; the gleams in later years from the sparks of memory in these eyes shall serve as storehouse of a conserved community of spirit. Former pleasures are formative of their successor insights, just as the greenness of woods and copses records the point of earliest entry into cherishment and gratitude felt towards the entire green earth of natural life. The landscape composed of memory still green and the greenness of the summer season likewise mark the connection between seasons of dearth and their subsequent regreening, the sweet inland murmur echoed in the comparable sweetness of restored sensation passing from blood to heart and heart to mind: a present pleasure as from a presence that self-construes upon reflection into the grandeur of fulfilled sublimity. These are 'the transitions and the impassioned music of the versification' which in his later note Wordsworth hoped might cause his poem to be recognised as an ode in all but name.

By such power of transformation the paradoxical vagrancy of local dwelling where no door-entrance offers a threshold between inner and outer space, natural unhoused wandering and its mimicry by the traveller on tour, enlarges into a mighty horizon of human remembrance hinting at closure, the light of setting suns; itself the dwelling or hermitage of vagrant being and presence beyond all simple locality, where the narrative of any one single sunset is subsumed into their constancy of recurrence. What separates at the outset is the apparently divisive effect of years of absence; but just as five years can be mended through echoes marked by repetition, guiding and guarding the genial spirits, so too the intermissions of a lifetime can enhance the vehemence of feeling into the marks of connection restored and held dear. Even the culminations of seasonal cycles, of diurnal rounds and many passing years, intimating a tacit final separation at the close of mortal life, strike no ultimate terrors for the holiness of the heart's affections, the prospect of a motion and a spirit that, not quite within the boundaries of a traditional theology, shape the oncoming form of a completed life.

J. H. Prynne
Cambridge, August 2001

NOTES

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH, 'Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, On Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour, July 13, 1798', in [William Wordsworth and S.T. Coleridge], *Lyrical Ballads, with a Few Other Poems* (London, 1798), pp. 201-210 [the final poem]. This book was conceived as a jointly-authored project in the spring of 1798 and published anonymously in September of that year; the Tintern Abbey poem was composed probably in the second week of July, when the book was already in press, and just in time to be included (which may, or may not, account for its final position). From 1815 it was included among 'Poems of the Imagination'. For detailed textual history and extensive secondary bibliography consult James Butler and Karen Green (eds), *'Lyrical Ballads' and Other Poems, 1797-1800* (The Cornell Wordsworth; Ithaca and London, 1992), pp. 116-120 (reading text); 357-359 (notes); 372-3 (nonverbal variants). To the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* Wordsworth added this: 'Note to the Poem on Revisiting the Wye, p. 201.-- I have not ventured to call this Poem an Ode; but it was written with a hope that in the transitions, and the impassioned music of the versification would be found the principal requisites of that species of composition' (William Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads, with Other Poems. In Two Volumes* [2nd ed., London, 1800], Vol. I, p. [215]; Wordsworth later inserted the missing comma after 'versification').

On 10th July 1798 William and Dorothy Wordsworth set out from Bristol (the 'tour' of the poem's title) and walked to Tintern, then on 11th July onwards to Goodrich, then (12th July) back to Tintern, returning to Bristol on the 13th. William was 28, Dorothy 27. Wordsworth's first visit to Tintern Abbey in the summer of 1793, age 23, alone and in very different mood, coincided with the height of revolutionary turmoil in France, and followed on from his journey across Salisbury Plain and thence from Bristol to Tintern. For his mood in 1793 compare *The Prelude* (1805-6), X, 757-90; *The Thirteen-Book Prelude*, ed. Mark L. Reed (3 vols, Ithaca and London, 1991), Vol. I, pp. 287-8.

Butler and Green cite in full the Fenwick Note, thus: 'July 1798. No poem of mine was composed under circumstances more pleasant for me to remember than this. I began it upon leaving Tintern, after crossing the Wye, and concluded it just as I was entering Bristol in the evening, after a ramble of 4 or 5 days, with my sister. Not a line of it was altered, and not any part of it written down till I reached Bristol. It was published almost immediately after in the little volume of which so much has been said in these notes (The Lyrical Ballads, as first published at Bristol by Cottle)' (p. 357).

For the (absent) abbey itself consult e.g. Arthur Edward Henderson, *Tintern Abbey; Then and Now* (2nd ed., London, 1937); David M. Robinson, *Tintern Abbey* (Welsh Historic Monuments; 4th rev. ed., Cardiff, 2002), also his *William Wordsworth's Tintern* (5th ed., Cardiff, 2002); for the question of contemporary touristic 'interest' in Tintern Abbey see John Rieder, *Wordsworth's Counterrevolutionary Turn; Community, Virtue, and Vision in the 1790s* [Newark, Del., 1997], pp. 202-220.

'Double-setting':

> A tranquillizing spirit presses now
> On my corporeal frame so wide appears
> The vacancy between me & those days
> Which yet have such self presence in my heart
> That some times when I think of them I seem
> Two consciousnesses, conscious of myself
> And of some other being.

From the 1799 draft for Part Two of *The Prelude*, first recorded in MS RV (fol. 1[r]) and transcribed in Stephen Parrish (ed.), *The Prelude, 1798-1799* (Ithaca and Hassocks, 1977), p. 169 (see also p. 55). This passage survives practically unaltered into the 1805-6 text (II, lines 27-33) and thence into the final version of 1850; see Jack Stillinger, 'Multiple "Consciousnesses" in Wordsworth's *Prelude*', in his *Multiple Authorship and the Myth of Solitary Genius* (New York, 1991), Chap. 4 (pp. 69-95), p. 73; also, M.H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism; Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York, 1971), p. 75; and (briefly also) Alan Richardson, *Literature, Education, and Romanticism; Reading as Social Practice, 1780-1832* (Cambridge, 1994), p. 18.

'The general passions and thoughts and feelings of men': 'Preface' to *Lyrical Ballads*, in a passage added in the 1850 edition; see *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. W.J.B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser (3 vols, Oxford, 1974), Vol. I, p. 142.

'Immortality Ode': 'Ode. Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early childhood' (1802-4), best reading text: *Poems, in Two Volumes, and Other Poems, 1800-1807*, ed. Jared Curtis (Ithaca, N.Y., 1983), pp. 269-77 (reading text), 428-430 (notes). The 'mighty waters rolling evermore' of line 168 in the *Ode* are not unrelated to the 'sense sublime' that in 'Tintern Abbey' 'rolls through all things' (line 103); these wave-motions constantly recapitulate their own recurrent forms, both transient and abiding–as also for Wordsworth does the measured recurrency of his blank verse composition and paragraphing, taking its cue from the spacious phrasing of the extended title.

'"murmur" contains its own repeat': compare J.H. Prynne, *Field Notes: 'The Solitary Reaper' and Others* (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 43, 75; 'Wild eyes': *ibid.*, p. 85. 'Tin/tern' is likewise near-reduplicative.

'From blood to heart and heart to mind':

> sensations sweet,
> Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart,
> And passing even into my purer mind
> With tranquil restoration.

'Tintern Abbey', lines 28-31; Butler and Green (eds), *'Lyrical Ballads' and Other Poems*, p. 117; 'along' is characteristically puzzling here, compare *The Prelude* (1805-6), I, 277 ('flow'd along my dreams'). For background to the contemporary arguments concerning body function and vital principle see e.g. June Goodfield-Toulmin, 'Some Aspects of English Physiology: 1780-1840', *Journal of the History of Biology*, 2 (1969),

p. 283-320; also Duncan Wu, *Wordsworth; An Inner Life* (Oxford, 2002), p. 40-2. Butler and Green cite Milton Wilson, 'Bodies in Motion: Wordsworth's Myths of Natural Philosophy' in *Centre and Labyrinth: Essays in Honour of Northrop Frye*, ed. Eleanor Cook *et al.* (Toronto, 1983), pp. 206-209.

'Tufts of snow': 'Frost at Midnight' (Feb 1798), best reading text: *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. J.C.C. Mays (6 vols, Princeton, N.J., 2001), Vol. I.1: *Poems (Reading Text: Part 1)*, pp. 452-7 (line 68).

'The prospect-poem': see e.g. Rachel Crawford, *Poetry, Enclosure, and the Vernacular Landscape, 1700-1830* (Cambridge, 2002), Chap. 6: 'Jago's *Edge-Hill*: Simulation and Representation' (pp. 138-165); also C.V. Deane, 'The Prospect Poem', in J.R. Watson (ed.), *Pre-Romanticism in English Poetry of the Eighteenth Century; The Poetic Art and Significance of Thomson, Gray, Collins, Goldsmith, Cowper & Crabbe* (Houndmills, 1989), pp. 125-33.

'The one life': 'The Eolian Harp: Composed at Clevedon, Somersetshire' (Aug-Oct 1795, also Feb? 1796); *Collected Works*, Vol. I.1, pp. 231-5 (lines 26-7).

'Diurnal round': 'A slumber did my spirit seal' (1800); Butler and Green (eds), *'Lyrical Ballads' and Other Poems*, pp. 164 (reading text), 384 (notes); also *The Prelude* (1805-6), I, 485-7; *The Thirteen-Book Prelude*, Vol. I, p. 120; compare also Shelley, 'With a Guitar. To Jane' (1822), 'driven on its diurnal round' (line 76).

'The holiness of the Heart's affections': letter to Benjamin Bailey of 22 November 1817; *The Letters of John Keats*, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins (2 vols, Cambridge, 1958), Vol. I, p. 184.

'A motion and a spirit': 'Tintern Abbey', line 101; Butler and Green (eds), *'Lyrical Ballads' and Other Poems*, p. 119.