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## “THE THORN”: WORDSWORTH’S DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE

BY STEPHEN MAXFIELD PARRISH

In Dorothy Wordsworth’s Alfoxden journal the entry for March 19, 1798, opens: “Wm. and Basil [Montagu] and I walked to the hill-tops, a very cold bleak day. We were met on our return by a severe hailstorm.” The scenes of this walk were familiar, but during the storm Wordsworth’s eye was caught and his poetic imagination fired by a solitary, aged tree. Dorothy marked the event by noting laconically as she closed the day’s entry: “William wrote some lines describing a stunted thorn.” Forty-five years later William corroborated her account of the genesis of one of his “lyrical ballads.” “The Thorn,” he told Isabella Fenwick, “arose out of my observing, on the ridge of Quantock Hill, on a stormy day, a thorn which I had often passed in calm and bright weather without noticing it. I said to myself, ‘Cannot I by some invention do as much to make this Thorn permanently an impressive object as the storm has made it to my eyes at this moment?’”<sup>1</sup>

The lines in which Wordsworth tried to make impressive his vision of a tree in a hailstorm have excited a good deal of critical attention. De Selincourt summed up majority opinion when he called them “the extreme example of W.’s experiment ‘to ascertain how far the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society is adapted to the purposes of poetic pleasure’” (*Poetical Works*, II, 513). The poem was experimental, but the nature of the experiment has, I believe, been misunderstood, and the poem almost universally misread. Of the dozens of critics who have commented on “The Thorn,” hardly one appears to have discerned who the central character is and what the poem is about. The readings fall, roughly, into two traditions. One holds that the narrator mars the poem:

<sup>1</sup> The Fenwick note is reproduced by de Selincourt and Miss Darbishire in *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, 5 vols. (Oxford, 1940-49), II, 511-512.

“The Thorn” would have been more satisfying had Wordsworth spoken it in his own voice. The other overlooks the narrator, focusing on the story he tells, the tragedy of Martha Ray: “The Thorn” is a haunting and powerful study in social morality. In the one view, “The Thorn” is a bad poem because of the narrator, in the other, a good poem in spite of the narrator.

It would be hard to decide which view is the more misleading, for what neither recognizes is that the narrator is not only the central figure but, in a sense, the subject of the poem. As its author conceived it, “The Thorn” is not a poem about an abandoned mother and her murdered infant, as nearly all critics have supposed, nor a poem about the maternal passion. It would be more accurate to call it a poem, first, about a tree, and second, about a man. It was intended to be a psychological study, a poem about the way the mind works. The mind whose workings are revealed is that of the narrator, and the poem is, in effect, a dramatic monologue.<sup>2</sup>

That Wordsworth’s design should have been lost sight of seems astonishing, for he took unusual pains to make it clear. In the “Advertisement” to the first edition of *Lyrical Ballads* he singled out five poems for comment. Besides touching on the sources of three and on the style of another, he had remarked meaningfully: “The poem of the Thorn, as the reader will soon discover, is not supposed to be spoken in the author’s own person: the character of the loquacious narrator will sufficiently shew itself in the course of the story.” In 1800, after the narrator’s character had totally failed to show itself, Wordsworth attached a lengthy note telling precisely what he had intended to do in “The Thorn.”<sup>3</sup> He began by confessing that “this Poem ought to have been preceded by an introductory Poem,” implying that he would have sketched there the history of “The Thorn’s” narrator, then went on to supply the information that poem might have contained. He asked the reader to visualize

<sup>2</sup> That is, loosely, a poem in which the events related are meaningful not in themselves but as they reveal the character of the person who relates them. Actually, “The Thorn” is a dialogue, but the second voice enters only to ask questions in language that echoes the narrator’s, giving the effect (probably intentional) of a ballad refrain.

<sup>3</sup> For the 1798 “Advertisement” and the 1800 note, see *Poetical Works*, II, 383-384 and 512-513.

“a man, a Captain of a small trading vessel, for example, who being past the middle age of life, had retired . . . to some village or country town of which he was not a native.” Why a man of this sort? Because, the poet explained, reaching his point deliberately and then summing it up: “Such men, having little to do, become credulous and talkative from indolence; and from the same cause, and other predisposing causes . . . they are prone to superstition. On which account it appeared to me proper to select a character like this to exhibit some of the general laws by which superstition acts upon the mind.”

Could any statement of poetic intent be plainer? As Wordsworth conceived it, “The Thorn” is a portrayal of the superstitious imagination. More literally than any other poem, it carries out the principal object of *Lyrical Ballads*: to trace in situations of common life “the primary laws of our nature,” chiefly “as regards the manner in which we associate ideas in a state of excitement.” For the manner in which the narrator associates ideas is precisely what “The Thorn” is about. The ideas themselves—that is, the “events” of the poem—are unimportant except as they reflect the working of the narrator’s imagination. In fact, the point of the poem may very well be that its central “event” has no existence outside of the narrator’s imagination—that there is no Martha Ray sitting in a scarlet cloak behind a crag on the mountain top, that the narrator has neither seen her nor heard her, that what he has seen is a gnarled old tree in a blinding storm, that what he has heard (besides the creaking of the branches, or the whistling of the mountain wind) is village superstition about a woman wronged years ago.

This reading of “The Thorn,” differing sharply from any traditional reading, alters the poem radically. It becomes not a poem about a woman but a poem about a man (and a tree); not a tale of horror but a psychological study; not a ballad but a dramatic monologue. Based as the reading is on Wordsworth’s statements of intent, the question it may seem to raise is whether the poem Wordsworth meant to write resembles the poem he did write. To take the question seriously is to show a singular skepticism about Wordsworth’s understanding of his own craft (his careful statements of intent were written after the poem, not before). Yet once raised it must be answered.

If we look closely at the poem Wordsworth did write in 1798, we shall find, I think, that it does correspond to the poem he later told us he had meant to write.

The design of "The Thorn" is revealed in the order in which the narrator associates ideas—the order, that is, in which the poem's "events" pass through his mind. The poem begins, as it began in Wordsworth's mind, with the tree.

There is a thorn; it looks so old,  
In truth you'd find it hard to say,  
How it could ever have been young,  
It looks so old and grey.

As the narrator's imagination begins to work (Stanza 2), he sees the old tree, "hung with heavy tufts of moss," engaged in a drama of nature:

Up from the earth these mosses creep,  
And this poor thorn they clasp it round  
So close, you'd say that they were bent  
With plain and manifest intent,  
To drag it to the ground. . . .

After this brief flight the narrator drops to prosaic detail, describing the thorn's location, the "little muddy pond," and the hill of moss "like an infant's grave in size." Not until Stanza 6 does he mention "a woman in a scarlet cloak," and when his listener asks why the unhappy creature sits by the thorn crying her doleful cry, the flat answer is (Stanza 9):

I cannot tell; I wish I could;  
For the true reason no one knows. . . .

But two stanzas later it turns out that the narrator can tell what everyone does know—and the story of Martha Ray begins slowly to unfold. His imagination warming, the old mariner relates what he has learned about the incidents that took place "some two and twenty" years ago (long before he came to the village): Martha's abandonment, her pregnancy, and her madness. But again he breaks off abruptly (Stanza 15):

No more I know, I wish I did,  
And I would tell it all to you;  
For what became of this poor child  
There's none that ever knew:  
And if a child was born or no,

There's no one that could ever tell;  
And if 'twas born alive or dead,  
There's no one knows, as I have said. . . .

Again, the professions of ignorance prove not to be serious, for we learn at once that Martha was seen that summer on the mountain, and that cries were later heard there, some "plainly living voices," others, it was believed, "voices of the dead" (Stanza 16). Here the narrator exhibits a nice skepticism.

I cannot think, whate'er they say,  
They had to do with Martha Ray.

To this point, the pattern of the poem has been consistent: as the narrator's loquacity ebbs and flows he retails, piece by piece, village recollection and superstition about Martha Ray. With Stanza 17, however (some two-thirds of the way through the poem), he suddenly offers first-hand testimony. He claims actually to have seen the woman by the tree. His testimony is highly important because he had already suggested that no one else has seen her there. Inviting his listener (Stanza 9) to view the spot, he had cautioned him to make sure first that Martha was in her hut ("Pass by her door—'tis seldom shut"), adding meaningfully:

I never heard of such as dare  
Approach the spot when she is there.

He would not, we gather, now venture to approach it himself; he had stumbled on it unknowingly (Stanza 17),

When to this country first I came  
Ere I had heard of Martha's name. . . .

On that occasion, the narrator and the poet now take impressive pains to point out (Stanzas 17 and 18), the visibility was wretched:

A storm came on, and I could see  
No object higher than my knee.  
'Twas mist and rain, and storm and rain,  
No screen, no fence could I discover,  
And then the wind! in faith, it was  
A wind full ten times over.  
I looked around, I thought I saw  
A jutting crag, and off I ran,  
Head-foremost, through the driving rain. . . .

But instead of a crag he saw, he thinks, "A woman seated on the ground." After a glimpse of her face through the rain he "turned about," then, above the wind, heard her cry, "O misery! O misery!"

Encouraged, perhaps, by the sound of his own testimony, and with his imagination now glowing hot, the narrator lets fall (Stanzas 20 to 22) the terrible superstitions he has been holding back: some say that Martha hanged her child, some that she drowned it, but all agree that it lies buried in the little mound; some say that the moss is red with blood, some that the infant's face can be seen on the pond, and some that the ground shook when the little tomb was threatened. After these revelations the narrator subsides abruptly, returning in the final stanza to the tree with which he had begun and the testimony he has offered:

I cannot tell how this may be,  
But plain it is, the thorn is bound  
With heavy tufts of moss, that strive  
To drag it to the ground.  
And this I know, full many a time,  
When she was on the mountain high,  
By day, and in the silent night,  
When all the stars shone clear and bright,  
That I have heard her cry,  
'O misery! O misery!  
'O woe is me! oh misery!'

From this review of its "events" the design of the poem should be clear. Stimulated by his memory of a tree, the narrator begins to relate village gossip about a woman. Some of it is factual, some not. Martha Ray and her lover did evidently exist twenty years ago, and the tree, the pond, the mound, and a "hut" nearby with a woman in it evidently exist now. On the other hand (Wordsworth was not, it is agreed, a poet of the supernatural), the ghostly voices from the mountain head, the shaking grass and the stirring moss, the "shadow of a babe" on the pond, are superstitions, products of the villagers' imaginations. But as the narrator retails these superstitions, his own imagination is roused to activity, and he proceeds to show how superstition acts upon his mind. By the end of the poem he clings to two ideas: that the moss on the tree is struggling to drag it down, and that near the spot he has heard

the woman's cry. Both ideas are colored with imagination—"by which word I mean the faculty," said Wordsworth in his note, "which produces impressive effects out of simple elements." They may, moreover, be closely related, the first showing how the narrator first saw the tree, the second suggesting how he saw it later, under the influence of village superstition—and that is perhaps why they fall together in the last lines of a poem designed to make a tree "impressive."

For consider the second idea in its context. After indicating that no one else could have seen the woman under the thorn, the narrator claims (but only after working deep into his story) to have glimpsed her once himself, at the height of a blinding storm. Wordsworth left ambiguities in the poem, but to leave one here—to suggest that Martha Ray was really on view by the tree in storms some twenty years after—would have been to throw away his best opportunity both of making the tree "impressive" and of exhibiting the "laws by which superstition acts upon the mind." For Martha's presence in the poem surely illustrates one law: that when a credulous old seaman catches sight in a storm of a suggestively-shaped tree hung with moss and later crams his head with village gossip, then his imagination can turn the tree into a woman, the brightly-colored moss into her scarlet cloak, and the creaking of the branches into her plaintive cry, "O misery! O misery!"<sup>4</sup>

The same effect was evidently created on March 19, 1798, by the imagination of a poet who had already crammed his head with German or Scottish ballads and tragedies of real life. One feature of the poem that has been called "inexplicable" might, on this assumption, be quite simply explained: this is the naming of Martha Ray after the grandmother of little Basil Montagu. When we remember that the boy went along on the

<sup>4</sup>In William Taylor's translation of Bürger's "Lenore," published in the *Monthly Magazine* (March, 1796), Wordsworth would have read the line, "The blasts athwarte the hawthorne hiss." But in his own "Haunted Tree," composed in 1819 (*Poetical Works*, II, 290-291), he wrote:

. . . some there are  
Whose footsteps superstitiously avoid  
This venerable Tree; for, when the wind  
Blows keenly, it sends forth a creaking sound  
(Above the general roar of woods and crags)  
Distinctly heard from far—a doleful note!

walk past Quantock Hill, we may conceivably have a revelation of the way the tree looked to Wordsworth during the hailstorm. By giving the creature in the poem the name of the creature who flashed before his eyes, Wordsworth may have been obeying a law of association, even one of the "laws by which superstition acts upon the mind."

Whatever the case, it may be helpful here to turn for a moment to *Peter Bell*, composed at about the same time as "The Thorn," a time when Wordsworth was preoccupied with the power of the human imagination.<sup>5</sup> Addressing the "Spirits of the Mind" who seize control of men's faculties, "Disordering colour form and stature" (l. 813), the poet testifies (ll. 826-830):

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  
When earth is calm, and heaven is bright.

A few stanzas later, the vision that Peter sees under the Spirits' influence, when "Distraction reigns in soul and sense" (l. 968), strikingly resembles the vision that haunted "The Thorn's" narrator. Peter's vision begins with a shrub—not a thorn, but a "flowering furze"—and features an abandoned female wailing a rhythmic lament (ll. 976-980):

And stretch'd 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!'

Wordsworth left fewer ambiguities in *Peter Bell* than in "The Thorn" (perhaps because while still working on it he had the instructive experience of seeing "The Thorn" misread), but he must have felt that even in "The Thorn" he was planting ample evidence that the narrator's vision was the handiwork of

<sup>5</sup>In the letter to Southey, April 7, 1819, prefaced to *Peter Bell*, Wordsworth touched on a central belief which had governed that poem's composition and probably also "The Thorn's," "a belief that the Imagination not only does not require for its exercise the intervention of supernatural agency, but that, though such agency be excluded, the faculty may be called forth as imperiously, and for kindred results of pleasure, by incidents within the compass of poetic probability, in the humblest departments of daily life." *Poetical Works*, II, 331.

“Spirits of the Mind,” called up not by guilt but by superstition.<sup>6</sup>

That evidence is complemented by one fact of the poem's later history: Wordsworth did not, it soon became clear, consider “The Thorn” to be essentially a poem about the maternal passion. The title alone might suggest this fact, but plainer suggestions lie in the way the piece was classified. In the letter to Coleridge of May, 1809, in which Wordsworth first spoke of collecting his poems, he designated as a separate class “those relating to Maternal feeling, connubial or parental,” and named as examples “The Sailor's Mother,” “The Emigrant Mother,” “The Affliction of Margaret —,” “The Mad Mother,” and “The Idiot Boy.”<sup>7</sup> In the collected edition of 1815 all these pieces, together with “The Complaint of a Forsaken Indian Woman,” and others, turned up as “Poems founded on the Affections.”

But not “The Thorn.” It was never linked with any of these titles. In 1809 Wordsworth placed it in a class of poems “relating to human life.” His account of the class is somewhat diffuse, but a meaningful distinction does emerge: “This class of poems I suppose to consist chiefly of objects most interesting to the mind not by its personal feelings or a strong appeal to the instincts or natural affections, but to be interesting to a meditative or imaginative mind either from the moral importance of the pictures or from the employment they give to the understanding affected through the imagination and to the higher faculties.” The distinction is between the “affections” and the imagination, and as might be expected “The Thorn” turned up in 1815 among “Poems of the Imagination,” where it remained in later editions.

If “The Thorn's” classification was fixed by 1815, however, its form was not. The event that led to its alteration was the appearance of *Biographia Literaria*, in which “The Thorn” was given more critical attention than any other single poem.

<sup>6</sup> It may be objected that in the 1805 *Prelude* (XIII, 402-403) Wordsworth mentioned “her who sate/ In misery near the miserable Thorn.” But here, as when he commented on Sir George Beaumont's painting of the tree and the woman (Fenwick note, *Poetical Works*, II, 511-512), Wordsworth would naturally have been viewing the poem's events as through the narrator's eyes.

<sup>7</sup> *Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Middle Years*, ed. de Selincourt, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1937), I, 308-309.

Coleridge, who had remained perversely insensitive to his partner's experimental study of the superstitious imagination, used it to point up his dissent from the theories about rustic characters and the language of common life set forth in the preface to *Lyrical Ballads*. Maintaining (Chapter 17) that "it is not possible to imitate truly a dull and garrulous discourser, without repeating the effects of dullness and garrulity," Coleridge suggested that "The Thorn's" best passages were those "which might as well or still better have proceeded from the poet's own imagination, and have been spoken in his own character," while the worst were those "exclusively appropriate to the supposed narrator."<sup>8</sup> His dissent stood even more sharply revealed toward the close of Chapter 17, which ended with a quotation from Wordsworth's "Thorn" note of 1800. Wordsworth had explained: "It was my wish in this poem to show the manner in which such men [as the narrator] cleave to the same ideas; and to follow the turns of passion, always different, yet not palpably different, by which their conversation is swayed." Hence the narrator wanders from one superstitious idea to another, repeats himself, strains for precision on unimportant details (as in the line measuring the pond—"Tis three feet long, and two feet wide"), alternately pleads ignorance and floods his listener with facts, as he proceeds to make the tree "impressive" (both to his listener and to the reader) by communicating casually yet inexorably and always with passion, his vision of horror. This technique Coleridge pointedly condemned (II, 42-43): "It is indeed very possible to adopt in a poem the unmeaning repetitions, habitual phrases, and other blank counters, which an unfurnished or confused understanding interposes at short intervals, in order to keep hold of his subject, which is still slipping from him, and to give him time for recollection; or in mere aid of vacancy. . . . But what assistance to the poet, or ornament to the poem, these can supply, I am at a loss to conjecture."

These remarks indicate that Coleridge had no sympathy with Wordsworth's immediate aim in "The Thorn"—to show how superstition works upon the mind—and little understanding of Wordsworth's ultimate aim—to make a tree "impres-

<sup>8</sup> *Biog. Lit.*, J. Shawcross, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1907), 36.

sive.” It is one thing to say that Wordsworth lacked dramatic skill, or that he chose his narrator unwisely. It is quite another to suggest that he should have dispensed with the narrator and related the “events” of the poem himself. Coleridge appears never to have accepted the idea that the “events” might be a product of the narrator’s imagination, that “The Thorn” was not a ballad but a dramatic monologue.

The profound disagreement between the partners in *Lyrical Ballads* which comes into focus in Coleridge’s remarks—a disagreement, essentially, about dramatic method—is a highly important one, but it was over by the time the remarks were published. Wordsworth, who had defended “The Thorn” for years, was now ready to abandon the struggle: he revised the poem extensively for the edition of 1820. The revisions had a single end, to elevate the language, making it less dramatic and more “poetic.” Ironically, by yielding to the first of Coleridge’s somewhat contradictory charges against the poem—that the narrator’s language was homely—Wordsworth laid himself more open to the second, which was more substantial—that the dramatic illusion was not sustained. However, the revisions hardly changed the poem. Their importance is that they marked a retreat on Wordsworth’s part from a daring and skilful experiment in a new genre. They have also, unfortunately, done their share to keep generations of readers and critics from appreciating the nature of that experiment, or its meaning, or its success.

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