

# Wordsworth and Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*

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Perhaps more vividly than any other poetical work of the period, the *Lyrical Ballads* of William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge documents Romanticism's impulse to merge artistic and social change. Featuring subjects from 'ordinary life, such as could be found 'in every village and its vicinity',<sup>1</sup> the collection expresses Wordsworth's conviction, phrased years later in a letter, that 'men who do not wear fine clothes can feel deeply'.<sup>2</sup> For Wordsworth and Coleridge, this egalitarian depiction of emotion was part of a larger model of literary reform – even of revolution – that required the repudiation of eighteenth-century modes of feeling and expression. *Lyrical Ballads* views English poetry as an effete, exhausted institution desperately needing to be regrounded in 'natural . . . human passions, human characters, and human incidents'. First published anonymously in 1798, the volume rejects alike the manipulative emotionalism of Sensibility and the studied aestheticism of neo-classical diction, instead aspiring to convey authentic human feeling by way of simple ballads and the ordinary 'language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society'.<sup>4</sup> Further, it asserts that such 'lower' forms of diction, which generally had been shunned by university-educated poets, are in fact a valid medium for philosophical poetry. And while its most famous works, Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and Wordsworth's *Tintern Abbey*, do not participate directly in the rustic subjects experiment, their narrators' emotional autobiographies fix the horizon line for future Romantic explorations of individualism and subjectivity.

There are, of course, moments – indeed, whole aspects – in which *Lyrical Ballads* can be said to fall short of its vaunted ambitions. Like any self-consciously radicalizing artistic project, it opens itself up to charges of inconsistency and self-contradiction. Chiefly, the question of 'authenticity', which *Lyrical Ballads* uses to cross-examine the literary establishment, has inevitably and often rightly been used to cross-examine *Lyrical Ballads* itself. This line of criticism has descended, in fact, from Coleridge's own *Biographia Literaria* (1817), which questioned Wordsworth's representation of 'the real language of men' as well as the usefulness of his generalized notion of rustic life.<sup>5</sup> Still, and to a degree that is striking in the context of often-changing critical fashions, the reputation of *Lyrical Ballads* remains powerfully anchored in the language of its own claims, of what it set out to do. Its galvanizing influence on the Romantic era is unquestionable, and while its declarations of

originality have been challenged, their underlying excitement continues to be infectious for readers.

If *Lyrical Ballads* has come to be monumentalized as a turning point in literary history, however, its own history as a volume is fraught with complicated – though crucial – twists and turns. The volume was published in four different editions (1798, 1800, 1802, 1805), and was so altered by 1800 that, in the words of one critical study, 'The second edition . . . is altogether different in character from the original 1798 publication'.<sup>7</sup> The 1798 volume contained 19 poems by Wordsworth and 23 altogether, most of which were written in at least quasi-balladic form. The two-volume second edition was more than double the length of the first, and virtually all of its 38 new poems were Wordsworth's. His name now appeared, singly, on the title-page. The poems were preceded by a massive new critical 'Preface', which, though written at Coleridge's urging, was largely shaped by Wordsworth's concerns. In this Preface appeared the definitions, terms and explanatory passages that now tend to dominate critical analysis of the *Lyrical Ballads* project. The new poems themselves showed a shift in style; Wordsworth gave less attention to rustic speech *per se* and began to experiment with blank verse as a means of expressing the broader dignity and pathos of rustic life.

It is sometimes difficult to know to what extent these items dating from 1800 and after – that is, the Preface, the new poems, Wordsworth's increasing control of the project, Coleridge's critique in the *Biographia* – can be legitimately applied to discussions of the famous 1798 volume. None the less, these post-1798 developments have become integral to the reputation and scholarly understanding of *Lyrical Ballads*, so that even as this essay turns 'back' to the poems and circumstances of the first edition, it inevitably draws on these later works, terms and ideas. Obviously *Lyrical Ballads*' status as a collaboration is also a highly vexed issue, but it should be made clear from the outset that while the project eventually and decisively became Wordsworth's, there simply would never have been a *lyrical Ballads* without Coleridge.<sup>8</sup>

William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge first met in the autumn of 1795, but it was June 1797, when Coleridge tramped 40 miles to see Wordsworth and his sister Dorothy at Racedown Lodge in Dorset, that saw the blossoming of the friendship. 'We both have a distinct remembrance of his arrival', the Wordsworths later recalled, 'He did not keep to the high road, but leaped over a gate and bounded down the pathless field by which he cut off an angle.'<sup>9</sup> Almost instantaneously, the men's acquaintance burst into ecstatic friendship. They read to one another their most recent works,<sup>10</sup> and took long walks filled with laughter and good feeling, political talk and literary planning. Coleridge once described himself as a figure of 'indolence capable of energies';<sup>11</sup> this friendship produced energies. His visit lasted only three weeks, but prompted a remarkable transformation of circumstance: in early July, William and Dorothy abandoned the isolation they had so consciously sought at Racedown Lodge and moved north to Alfoxden House, four miles from Coleridge and his wife Sara at Nether Stowey. In the months that followed the men were together constantly. As Wordsworth put it later, with words that capture the suddenness, exuberance and excess of it all, they 'Together wantoned in wild poesy' (*The Prelude*, XIII, 414). Coleridge thought Wordsworth 'capable of producing . . . the FIRST GENUINE PHILOSOPHICAL POEM', and

described him as 'a very great man – the only man, to whom *at all times & in all modes of excellence* I feel myself inferior . . . for the London Literati appear to me to be very much like little Potatoes – i.e. *no great Things!* – a compost of Nullity & Dullity'.<sup>12</sup> The Wordsworths saw in Coleridge a dazzling type of the inspired poet, something like a benevolent version of the oracular bard who later appeared in Coleridge's own *Kub/a Khan*. The men's early attempts to collaborate on individual poems proved comically frustrating,<sup>13</sup> but they talked so continually about poetry, Coleridge later recalled, that they could hardly be sure which one of them 'started any particular Thought'.<sup>14</sup> Thriving on each other's company, they grew in creativity and confidence, and soon began producing the great poetry for which they are now remembered.

The men's shared political sympathies helped in the rapid evolution of their intimacy. Both had been enthusiastic supporters of the French Revolution, and though disenchanted by its betrayal of its origins, maintained strong democratic beliefs.<sup>16</sup> Temperamentally they were quite different. Coleridge was the more effusive personality, animated by an assortment of intellectual desires. An avid reader (a 'library-cormorant', he called himself), an aspiring philosopher and a vigorously believing Christian, his taste ran to 'Accounts of all the strange phantasms that ever possessed your philosophy-dreamers'.<sup>17</sup> 'From my early reading of Faery Tales, & Genii &c &c', he wrote, 'my mind had been habituated to the *Vast*'.<sup>18</sup> Coleridge was also notoriously talkative: 'In digressing, in dilating, in passing from subject to subject, he appeared . . . to float in air, to slide on ice'.<sup>19</sup> His charisma was legendary – though those who heard his sprawling disquisitions often professed not to know exactly what he was talking about.

Wordsworth was far more reserved, had little interest in systematic philosophy, and was, according to Coleridge, 'at least a Semi-atheist'.<sup>20</sup> But beneath his quiet exterior lurked powerful ambition and a mind equally habituated to the *Vast*. In his later autobiographical poem *The Prelude* Wordsworth would describe his psychic education not as a Coleridgean fascination with books and tales of the supernatural, but as a full-scale immersion in the sometimes frightening infinitude of the natural world: 'Fair seed-time had my soul, and I grew up / Fostered alike by beauty and by fear' (*The Prelude*, l. 306-7). In nature Wordsworth sensed elemental connections to the human spirit and imagination. It was once said of his poetry that 'It is as if there were nothing but himself and the universe',<sup>21</sup> and in his most magnificent passages of blank verse Wordsworth seems to encounter directly the power behind nature's visible forms. Such passages (found for example in *The Ruined Cottage* and later in *The Prelude*) employ an elevated voice and stately metre reminiscent of Milton.<sup>22</sup> Yet Wordsworth was ever mindful of the potential of humbler poetic forms. *Lyrical Ballads* records several of his efforts to evoke deep human feeling, and our intuitive affinity for nature, through simple tales told in simple rhyming verse.

Amidst the myriad schemes for joint and individual publication which Wordsworth and Coleridge were contemplating, *Lyrical Ballads* emerged almost randomly, an outgrowth of Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner* (a poem originally planned with the hope of five pounds from a literary magazine).<sup>23</sup> That the *Ancient Mariner* served to kindle the entire project may initially seem odd, since its length, archaic spellings and relentless supernaturalism make it arguably the most anomalous poem of the finished collection.<sup>24</sup> Wordsworth later worried about the poem's apparent strangeness, but it seems that at first he and Coleridge had planned more verse of this sort,<sup>25</sup> their idea being to balance

works based upon supernatural 'incidents and agents' with works reflecting 'the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us'.<sup>26</sup> Both sorts of poems would portray heightened states of consciousness, and trace the way the mind 'associates ideas in a state of excitement'.<sup>27</sup>

In practice the volume didn't maintain this balance. While Coleridge struggled unsuccessfully to complete several long supernatural pieces,<sup>28</sup> Wordsworth in a three-month span – March to May 1798 – produced a dozen ballad-like poems on 'natural subjects taken from common life'.<sup>29</sup> The volume opens with the mesmerizing *Ancient Mariner* and closes with *Tintern Abbey*, Wordsworth's superb blank-verse reflection on his growth through nature. The poems in between, despite many clear resemblances, display varieties of tone, subject, form and diction that defy a single concise formulation. Coleridge thought the poems functioned best when considered collectively: *Lyrical Ballads* is 'one work', he said, 'as an Ode is one work', and the 'different poems are as stanzas, good relatively rather than absolutely'.<sup>30</sup> Still, it is perhaps easier to think of the poems not as a single entity, but as a set of related (sometimes overlapping) groups.

Several thematic and topical groupings are immediately visible within *Lyrical Ballads* 1798: poems of the supernatural (e.g. *The Ancient Mariner*, *Goody Blake and Harry Gill*); poems on human suffering (*The Thorn*, *The Dungeon*, *The Female Vagrant*, *Simon Lee*); poems on children's psychology (*We Are Seven*, *Anecdote for Fathers*); poems suspicious of books and intellectualism (*The Nightingale*, *The Tables Turned*); and poems that exalt nature (*Tintern Abbey*, *Lines Written at a Small Distance from my House*).<sup>31</sup> But it is equally useful to group the poems along formalist and tonal lines, and doing so brings different affiliations unexpectedly to light. If we focus on *Lyrical Ballads*' dramatic dialogues, for example, we find repeated instances of questioning, even badgering narrators in poems otherwise dissimilar: *Expostulation and Reply*, *We Are Seven*, *Anecdote for Fathers*, *Old Man Travelling*, *The Last of the Flock*. Dramatic differences of tone distinguish the various poems on human suffering. While *The Mad Mother* and the *Complaint of the Forsaken Indian Woman* generate compassion, for example, they could also be said to veer toward voyeurism. Meanwhile, *The Idiot Boy*, *Old Man Travelling*, *Simon Lee* and *The Thorn* intermix empathy and ironic detachment.<sup>32</sup>

In the 'Advertisement' to *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth and Coleridge asserted that they intended their 'strange and awkward' experimental poetry to militate against literary convention. So it comes as no surprise that at least some of the poems take up the subject of poetry itself. Wordsworth's *Lines left upon a Seat in a Yew-Tree* and Coleridge's *The Nightingale* feature men of poetic temperament whose sensitivity has gone bad. The doomed young man of the *Yew-Tree* lines begins life with 'lofty views', only to be disappointed by the world's callousness and indifference. Taking this neglect as evidence of his superiority, he finds 'morbid pleasure' (28) in his isolation:

his spirit damped  
At once, with rash disdain he turned away,  
And with the food of pride sustained his soul  
In solitude (18-21)

But, as the poem warns, 'pride, / Howe'er disguised in its own majesty, / Is littleness' (46-8)<sup>33</sup> and his wilful sequestration leads to melancholy, decay and eventual death. Similarly,

*The Nightingale* tells the lamentable tale of a poet who 'filled all things with himself / And made all gentle sounds tell back the tale / Of his own sorrows' (19-21). Poetic tradition is part of the problem here – specifically, the practice of depicting the Nightingale's song as one of grief. This arbitrary convention too easily infects the mind, promoting in the poetically inclined a fanciful, self-induced and unnecessary misery. As an antidote the poem offers 'A different lore', in which 'Nature's sweet voices [are] always full of love / And joyance!' (41-3):

[The poet] had better far have stretched his limbs  
Beside a brook in mossy forest-dell  
By sun or moonlight, co the influxes  
Of shapes and sounds and shifting elements  
Surrendering his whole spirit, of his song  
And his fame forgetful' So his fame  
Should share in nature's immortality (25-31)

In highlighting the almost subjective qualities of nature – its active powers of 'joyance' and replenishment for those willing to 'surrender' – Coleridge implicitly rejects a melancholic strain of eighteenth-century verse<sup>34</sup> in which nature exists as a mere backdrop for

the morose 'higher' emotions of an isolated poetic consciousness. He also looks askance at a related phenomenon, the so-called 'cult of Sensibility', which influenced artistic expression and identity formation over the last half of the century. 'Sensibility', basically a capacity for acute emotional response to scenes of distress, was theoretically a vehicle for virtue and benevolence, but often promoted a self-regard that precluded social action. As Coleridge had noted elsewhere, 'Sensibility is not Benevolence. Nay, by making us tremblingly alive to trifling misfortunes, it frequently prevents it, and induces effeminate and cowardly selfishness'.<sup>35</sup>

In the 1800 Preface Wordsworth pursues his own critique of misdirected feeling in slightly different terms. 'The human mind is capable of being excited without the application of gross and violent stimulants', he implores with palpable desperation.

The invaluable works of our elder writers, I had almost said the works of Shakespear [sic] and Milton, are driven into neglect by frantic novels, sickly and stupid German Tragedies, and deluges of idle and extravagant stories ;n verse.<sup>36</sup>

Ranging freely across genres, but doubtless thinking of novels like Lewis's *The Monk*, Beckford's *Vathek* and Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, Wordsworth is denouncing both the 'degrading thirst after outrageous stimulation' and the sensational plot elements that provoke it: abductions, torture, hauntings, tragic love affairs, suicide, murder, incest, rape. His lyrical ballads demote the status of narrative incident: 'the feeling therein developed gives importance to the action and situation and not the action and situation to the feeling'.<sup>37</sup>

While perfectly coherent on its own terms, Wordsworth's intention of reordering the relative importance of plot and feeling may not be clearly apparent in poems like *The Mad Mother*, *The Thorn* and *The Last of the Flock*, which themselves revel in tragic and pathetic 'situations'. But Wordsworth's tableaux of woe are never simply devices for linking

together strings of sensational events. 'Incidents are among the lowest allurements of poetry', he wrote to Coleridge in 1798, 'in poems descriptive of human nature, however short they may be, character is absolutely necessary'.<sup>38</sup> The attempt is to construct psychological portraits which take time to develop, and occasionally suspend the action. Even when fixated upon distress, these poems reject the formulaic impulse of Sensibility ty in

favour of an analytical approach to 'the history or science of feelings'.<sup>39</sup>

It is nature that anchors and 'frames the measure' of human feeling: such is the didactic claim that motivates several of the ballads written by Wordsworth in the spring of 1798. In *Lines Written at a Small Distance from my House* Wordsworth tries to coax Dorothy away from their usual routine of reading and study with the promise of nature's 'blessing in the m' (5):

One moment now may give us more  
Than fifty years of reason;  
Our minds shall drink at every pore  
The spirit of the season. (25-8)

The companion poems *Expostulation and Reply* and *The Tables Turned*, inspired by a conversation with a friend who was somewhat unreasonably attached to modern books o'. moral philosophy',<sup>40</sup> sketch a day-long discussion over the relative merits of, on one hand, academic knowledge and, on the other, the 'Spontaneous wisdom' (19) to be found in the natural world. In this exchange it is the narrator of *The Tables Turned* who speaks for Wordsworth:

One impulse from a vernal wood  
May teach you more of man,  
Of moral evil and of good  
Than all the sages can. (21-4)

These poems employ a plainness of diction intended to reflect truths so intuitively central in human existence as to make elaboration unnecessary and even inappropriate. And yet they also contain images that resonate with unexpected power:

Sweet is the lore which nature brings,  
Our meddling intellect  
Misshapes the beauteous forms of things –  
We murder to dissect.

Enough of science and of art,  
Close up these barren leaves;  
Comes forth, and bring with you a heart  
That watches and receives.

*(The Tables Turned, 25-32)*

To her fair works did nature link  
The human soul that through me ran,  
And much it grieved my heart to think  
What man has made of man.

*(Lines Written in Early Spring, 5-8)*

By incorporating richly suggestive phrasings ('We murder to dissect', 'What man has made of man') into rapid, declarative metres, Wordsworth's ballads achieve a lingering complexity – as if to suggest that while nature's truths may be instinctively felt, their full comprehension requires a lifetime of devoted 'watching and receiving'.

Perhaps the more famous – or notorious – of the volume's ballads are those featuring the weak and vulnerable: children, beggars, deserted mothers, old men, many of them infirm, destitute, or even deranged. These poems frequently depict the wrenching pain of loss, often fixing upon a single moment that embodies a long process of dissolution and decline. *Simon Lee* recounts an old huntsman's physical decay through his difficulty in wielding an axe; in *The Last of the Flock* a shepherd's herd (and his happiness) have dwindled down almost to nothing. In *The Mad Mother* and *The Complaint of a Forsaken Indian Woman* abandoned women cling desperately to their infants; maternity – even tormented maternity – represents for each the last link to sanity and human hope.

Some readers may find the intense emotionalism of these poems deeply affecting; some may find them maudlin, overwrought, or even silly. But Wordsworth was convinced that the emotional lives of humble persons had a special clarity that demanded prolonged attention. In perhaps the best-known passage from the extended Preface to the second edition (1800), he argued that

Low and rustic life was generally chosen because in that situation the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity . . . because in that situation our elementary feelings . . . may be more accurately contemplated and more forcibly communicated.<sup>41</sup>

Wordsworth would try to bring to his poetry the 'plainer and more emphatic language' of these feelings, which, he argued, was 'a more permanent and a far more philosophical language than that which is frequently substituted for it by Poets'.<sup>42</sup> The notion that educated people could learn something about themselves from reading tales of the peasantry repelled some critics; in the words of Francis Jeffrey (a writer for the *Edinburgh Review* and Wordsworth's long-time nemesis), 'the love, or grief, or anger of a clown, a tradesman, or a market-wench' is 'itself a different emotion' than the 'Love, or grief, or indignation of an enlightened and refined character'.<sup>43</sup> Jeffrey's protest helps crystallize the radicalism of these poems. To locate in humble and rustic life the revelation of *universal* human feeling – 'the primary laws of our nature' – was to overturn a prevailing social psychology which had denied significance, complexity and nuance to the 'feelings' of the uneducated. Wordsworth did more than bring these feelings into the literary arena; as he wrote in the 1800 Preface, he 'endeavoured to look steadily'<sup>44</sup> at them. Poems like *We Are Seven* and *The Last of the Flock* force our participation far past the point of comfort, appropriating the pointed refrains of the ballad form to convey psychic fixation ('"O Master! we are seven"') and anguish ('"For me it was a woeful day"'). In the attempt 'to communicate impassioned feelings', Wordsworth noted, 'there will be a craving in the mind' to 'cling to the same words, or words of the same character';<sup>45</sup> and he extends his use of repetition to show – through careful alterations of key phrases – the high-speed cycles and reversals of impassioned feelings, what he called the 'fluxes and refluxes' of the active imagination. Thus, the shepherd's continual reference to a 'woeful day' in *The Last of the Flock* gives history – and intrinsic worth – to his agony and derangement.

Wordsworth's sympathy with the poor, weak and disenfranchised is, then, one of the primary legacies of *Lyrical Ballads*. Yet this sympathy is rarely simple or straightforward. Once we begin taking serious account of the narrators, the poems' attitude towards suffering becomes difficult to summarize. Consider the divided speaker of *Simon Lee*. For the first 80 lines he appears to be telling old Simon's story mainly for sport, using Simon's advancing age and frailty as an occasion for demonstrating his belief in his talent as a balladeer:

Of years he has upon his back,  
No doubt, a burthen weighty;  
He says he is three score and ten,  
But others say he's eighty. (5-8)

The narrator so enjoys the constraints of the form, which demands frequent, pithy rhymes, that he is willing to denigrate the story he's attempting to tell.

What more I have to say is short,  
I hope you'll kindly take it;  
It is no tale, but, should you chink,  
Perhaps a tale you'll make it. (77-80)

When he finally reaches the narrative, it is over and done with in a moment: after watching Simon struggling to remove a rotten stump, the speaker takes the axe and, with 'a single blow', severs the root. Recounting Simon's tears of thanks, however, the speaker becomes earnest and reverent, and the poem closes with quiet but complicated wisdom:

I've heard of hearts unkind, kind deeds  
With coldness still returning,  
Alas, the gratitude of men  
Has oft'ner left me mourning. (101-4)

The painful sympathy in these lines may seem at odds with the speaker's earlier self-indulgence, but perhaps Wordsworth relies upon the ballad form to make the turn plausible. The long introduction, with its jokes, detours and evasions, may allow the speaker the time he needs to face the pathos looming at the end of his tale.

Possibly, then, in *Simon Lee* Wordsworth manipulates tone so as to surprise us into compassion. But in other poems the marked separation between narrator and rustic figure makes the tone harder to assess. *Old Man Travelling*, for example, seems to break into two parts. In the first the narrator admiringly describes the old man as 'insensibly subdued / To settled quiet' (7-8), led by nature to a 'perfect' peace. He then discovers, however, that the man is actually journeying to see his dying son – at which point the poem abruptly ends, with no attempt whatever to reconcile these disparate images. We may decide that the narrator's sudden silence shows his embarrassment over having presumed the old man to have been at peace. Or it may equally reveal the narrator's baffled acceptance of the old man's composure in the face of a personal tragedy. Any such judgement, however, must remain conjectural.



If we know too little about the narrator of *Old Man Travelling*, we know too much about the narrator of *The Thorn*. Wordsworth included with the 1800 edition a remarkably detailed note describing the narrator as a retired man with a 'small independent income' who is 'talkative' and 'prone to superstition'. Readers may find him a little dull, Wordsworth confesses, but he is trying to show how such men 'communicate impassioned feelings'.<sup>46</sup> Under these circumstances, with the poem filtered through the consciousness of an explicitly superstitious, impassioned (and tedious) old man, it is difficult to evaluate his obsessive rehearsal of Martha Ray's sad story, or even to say with certainty that the poem's larger point lies in offering her compassion. *The Idiot Boy* presents other difficulties. Wordsworth says he 'never wrote anything with so much glee',<sup>47</sup> but we must wonder about the poem's supposed humour. Certainly, it offers a sort of extended sight gag in the vision of Johnny, and then Betty Foy, and finally Susan successively trooping into town, each out to rescue the one who has gone before. But if this is pleasure, it seems to be the pleasure of superiority, as we are invited to participate in the narrator's apparent mocking of poor, irrational Betty.

Why is Wordsworth's attitude so difficult to divine in some of these poems? Part of the answer may be found in chapter 14 of *Biographia Literaria*, where Coleridge notes that Wordsworth hoped 'to give the charm of novelty to things of every day . . . by awakening the mind's attention from the lethargy of custom'.<sup>48</sup> Poems like *Old Man Travelling*, *The Idiot Boy* and *The Thorn* approach us obliquely, presenting situations whose drama lies in our own decision to assert meanings never made explicit in the verse itself. Similarly, the dramatic dialogues *Anecdote/or Fathers* and *We Are Seven* depend upon our willingness to be agents of discovery, since we must work against Wordsworth's narrators, as well as with them, to gain the poems' insights into human psychology. We also must remember, as both the 1798 Advertisement and the 1800 Preface make clear, that Wordsworth had other interests as a poet beyond the sympathetic depiction of human misery. These poems were, first and last, 'experiments', written 'with a view to ascertain how far the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society is adapted to the purposes of poetic pleasure'.<sup>49</sup> If they were to be of any value as experiments, they had to involve real artistic risk. So although we may ultimately feel bewildered rather than illuminated by the idiosyncratic narrators of *The Thorn* and *The Idiot Boy*, their presence testifies to the artistic daring of Wordsworth's scheme.

For most readers the collection's two most successful poems are the ones that frame it: Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner* and Wordsworth's *Tintern Abbey*, works central to the achievement of each poet and which openly reveal their different artistic strengths and preoccupations. The blank-verse meditation of *Tintern Abbey*, spoken in what Coleridge called Wordsworth's 'own character, in the impassioned, lofty, and sustained diction, which is characteristic of his genius',<sup>50</sup> is utterly dissimilar to the *Mariner's* surreal galloping and indeed frightening narrative. Yet the poems have important, surprising affinities.

The 'bright-eyed marinere' (44) and the Wordsworthian narrator who gazes over the Wye Valley recount personal histories that, while ostensibly addressed to others (the Wedding-Guest and Dorothy, respectively), are fundamentally internal. Each is trying to assimilate, and make sense of, his movement from a past period of innocent happiness

into the perilous world of self-knowledge and self-consciousness. Each poem imagines – though in radically different terms – a restorative, elemental link between the human spirit and natural creation. Each, however, derives its ultimate power not from its clearest statement of faith and affirmation, but from its particular qualities of narrative voice.

The Mariner's tale is the darker. His earlier exploration of the land of 'Mist and snow' (49) has also been a bewildering confrontation with himself – that is, with his weakness, wilfulness, humanity. Though recovered from the immediate crisis of the journey, he has by no means transcended its awful revelations, and is compelled to revisit them as he tells his story over and again. Thus, his blithe concluding moral of natural harmony ('He sayeth best who loveth best, / All things both great and small': 647-8) is never allowed to entirely neutralize the haunted self-loathing that seems ultimately to govern the poem: 'And a million million slimy things / Lived on – and so did I' (230-1).

The speaker of *Tintern Abbey*, on the other hand, cannot miss his way, certain that his disappointments and sufferings shall be turned to the good. Even so, the poem is remarkable for the subtlety of the emotional states it evokes. Things have been lost in Wordsworth's life, and though he insists he has found 'Abundant recompense' (89) for them, the fact of loss is allowed to remain a palpable, unextinguished presence in the poem. Throughout *Tintern Abbey* exhilarating emotional heights are attained through an embrace of stillness and quietude. Thus, the poem's first great crescendo – its blissful revelation of a visionary link between nature and humanity – is realized as a slow, lingering hush:

And even the motion of our human blood  
Almost suspended, we are laid asleep  
In body, and become a living soul;  
While with an eye made quiet by the power  
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,  
We see into the life of things. (45-50)

Similarly, while the poem's most decisive statement of belief may be found in the soaring declaration that Wordsworth has found 'In nature and the language of the sense' the 'guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul / Of all my moral being' (109-12), it is perhaps even more masterful in the lines preceding, as Wordsworth gives voice to the powers of loss and quiet reflection:

For I have learned  
To look on nature not as in the hour  
Of thoughtless youth, but hearing oftentimes  
The still, sad music of humanity,  
Nor harsh nor grating, though of ample power  
To chasten and subdue. And I have felt  
A presence that disturbs me with the joy  
Of elevated thoughts, a sense sublime  
Of something far more deeply interfused,  
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,  
And the round ocean and the living air,  
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man (89-100)

In another defining romantic text, Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, the 'deep truth is imageless', but at this moment in *Tintern Abbey* Wordsworth seems, at least momentarily, to have glimpsed that deep truth, and to have shown us the outlines of its huge, shadowy forms. He is, in this sense, a seer and a prophet of 'all of the mighty world / Of eye and ear' (107-8), just as surely as the lonely Mariner is the prophet of some awful inner truths about human conduct and alienation. Wordsworth finds, through and within nature, an elemental power that both awakens the human mind and follows from it:

A motion and a spirit that impels  
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,  
And rolls through all things. (101-3)

The speakers in *The Ancient Mariner* and *Tintern Abbey* are two clear prototypes of what we now call the Romantic artist. The Mariner's power derives from his isolation, indeed from his sin; the darkness of his tale is the very source of its attraction. He is our conduit to the unconscious, to a whole complex of fears about our capacity for violence and corruption. In *Tintern Abbey*, Wordsworth speaks in a different voice: patiently confident and self-commanding. Doubts are swept up in hope, and Wordsworth's tenacious belief in nature's restorative power is revealed as an expression of his abiding faith in the human mind. Thus, while *Lyrical Ballads* gives us the instabilities that come with experimentation – uncertain parody, competing narrative voices, ambiguities of tone and judgement – it begins and ends with the authority of the spoken word and the surety of the visionary imagination.