The Betrayals of “Tintern Abbey”

Wordsworth gave early evidence in his play The Borderers of his intense and nuanced interest in the problematics of betrayal. The word “betray” and its cognates occur ten times in the 1797–99 version, including three instances in the 1797 preface, and the play’s action and vocabulary repetitively fix on moments when people are betrayed (seduced, fooled, deceived) into betraying (forsaking, abandoning, leaving), with fatal consequences.1 Mortimer, the sympathetically treated protagonist, at first is persuaded that, contrary to appearances, a blind old man is a betrayer. Then he learns that the persuader himself has “betray’d” him (iv.ii.182) in the very act of claiming to have detected betrayal. Later still he redefines “human nature” as fundamentally “betrayed” (v.iii.59). What in the end differentiates the Iago-like villain, Rivers, from Mortimer is not that the first is the betrayer and the second is the betrayed, but that after having parallel histories of getting betrayed and betraying, Rivers chooses a life as an intentional betrayer and Mortimer disconsolately searches for a less destructive role.

The deepest affinity between some of the most influential recent criticism of Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey” and the poem itself is an almost vertiginous, though often unstated, preoccupation with the dangers, disguises, and treatments of betrayal. The poem uses the word just once—

Knowing that Nature never did betray
The heart that loved her

(123–24)

1. William Wordsworth, The Borderers, ed. Robert Osborn (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1982). Some form of the word “betray” is explicit in lines 5 and 166 of the preface and in ii.iii.203, iii.v.63, iv.ii.70 and 182, iv.iii.96, v.iii.59 and 242. Synonyms are offered, for example, in the stage direction ending iii.iii, iii.iv.5, iii.v.134–35, iv.ii.36, 41, 49, 68, and 83, v.ii.51 and 57.
—but implies often, as Nicholas Roe phrases it, the “recollection of other and earlier betrayals.”² It implies too a scheme for understanding, surviving, and outflanking the presence of betrayal in human life. Several New Historicist critics—Jerome McGann, James Chandler, and Marjorie Levinson—find that the central movement of the poem itself constitutes a betrayal: a desertion, suppression, or erasure of truth, history, economic, social, and material reality, as well as the poet’s own revolutionary past, for the sake of ideological mystification.³ “Tintern Abbey,” from this point of view, becomes still another kind of betrayal, a seduction of the unwitting reader. But in exposing its alleged deceitfulness this recent criticism has underestimated the text’s implied argument as a contribution to the study of betrayal and historical change. In the process, I suggest, the poem’s metaphoricity, negative rhetoric, intertextuality, and maverick historicity have been slighted.

It is undeniably curious that a poem which famously refers to Tintern Abbey in its lengthy title—“Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey on revisiting the banks of the Wye during a tour, July 13, 1798”—never refers to it in the body of the text. Levinson reconstructs some historical contexts of the missing abbey and its environs, stressing Henry viii’s suppression of the monasteries as a Protestant and proto-capitalist landmark in the undermining of Catholic organic society and seeing in the charcoal-burning beggars who lived nearby in the 1790s an epitome of what Protestantism and capitalism had wrought (14–57). She claims that these associations of the place were so dominant and objective that they were what Wordsworth in 1798 had in mind—though his own complicity with the malefactors hindered him from putting these ideas into words:

Tintern’s devaluation is the effect of irresistible socioeconomic forces allegorically and immediately inscribed in the town, along the river banks, and within the ruin itself. And, Wordsworth had himself abetted those forces, consciously and unawares. (35)

The poem’s silence about the place and its contentious history amounts, for Levinson, to a suppression of history as such (36), and Wordsworth’s


tentative, fanciful allusion to "vagrant dwellers in the houseless woods" (line 21) accomplishes a like suppression of the factuality of the homeless by a different rhetorical route (43).

In the great debate of the 1790s about the French Revolution and its possible extension elsewhere, a quite different and even opposed historical context riveted the attention of Wordsworth's generation. Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* treats at length the National Assembly's seizure of the property of the Catholic Church in France and the attempt to use it to pay off the debts of the French monarchy. Instead of congratulating the revolutionary authorities for following the precedent of Henry VIII, Burke deplores any threat to the property, financial independence, or authority of the established church, whether that institution is Catholic, as in France, or Protestant, as in England. He assumes that in the context of his times both are in parallel positions, and his most conspicuous antagonist in the 1790s, Thomas Paine, agreed with him. When Burke writes of "Church and State," explains Paine in *The Rights of Man*, "he uses the term as a general figure to hold forth the political doctrine of always uniting the church with the State in every country. . . ." Paine accepts Burke's premise but draws from it a sharply different conclusion: "All national institutions of churches, whether Jewish, Christian or Turkish," he argues in *The Age of Reason*, "appear to me no other than human inventions, set up to terrify and enslave mankind, and monopolize power and profit" (italics added). Levinson's reading of the monastery in Wordsworth's poem in terms of an opposition between Catholic and Protestant values seems an anachronistic importation of Reformation and counter-Reformation polemics, on the one hand, and late nineteenth-century and twentieth-century historiography about the alleged link between Protestantism and the rise of capitalism, on the other.

Like "The Ruined Cottage" of 1797–98, Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" uses the imagery of buildings and ruins to wrestle with Burkean themes, but, despite Chandler's influential argument that throughout his great decade Wordsworth is a Burkean conservative manqué, the poet during this period writes as a revisionist, not a disciple of Burke. In

the characters of the abandoned wife and the aging pedlar in “The Ruined Cottage” Wordsworth honors a sector of society which only a levelling muse could celebrate. At the same time he analyzes Burkean political philosophy into two separable and potentially opposed components. Margaret’s attachment to the cottage where she lived with her husband figures her attachment to the marriage itself. She is a Burkean particularist: deeply loyal to the microsociety which is inextricable from her identity. “To be attached to the subdivision, to love the little platoon we belong to in society, is the first principle (the germ as it were) of public affections,” Reflections had argued (41). As war, economic distress, and other disruptions deprive her of her husband’s presence, she refuses to change or leave, insisting that nothing else can ever claim her affection. The weeds which overgrow her garden point to her irremediable distress. The ruination of the cottage is emblematic of the dissolution of the social structure which sustained her, as well as of her psychological disintegration and death. The same Burkean particularism might be exhibited in uncompromising commitment to any social or political structure—a state, a church, a class, an economic system, a form of government. Burke’s “comparison of the English Constitution to ‘the proud Keep of Windsor’” in A Letter to a Noble Lord, as William Hazlitt noted admiringly, imagines a renowned secular and religious architectural complex as a symbol of constitutional monarchy, the union of church and state, British patriotism and tradition, and the sacred values associated for Burke with all these things. The “idea,” explained Hazlitt, “is confounded with the object representing it.” 7 If the cherished structure was collapsing, however, unqualified disaster was, on such premises, inevitable.

The pedlar, by contrast, shuns particular institutional attachments—what Burke calls “subordinate partiality” (Reflections 173)—and shifts his loyalties from one’s own “peculiar nook of earth” (70) to a natural macrocosm which endlessly renews itself. The very weeds which spoke of catastrophe in relation to Margaret are a source of the “beautiful” (518) for Armytage, who extracts from them a “happiness” that can face down “ruin” and “change” (521). His conception of beauty derives from Burke’s claim in his early treatise on the sublime and beautiful that “gradual variation” is one of beauty’s chief properties. On the other hand, the sublime or terrifying, for Burke, can be produced by “every

thing sudden and unexpected." The pedlar learns to commit himself to the things which persist and renew instead of the things which perish. Margaret does just the reverse. The Wordsworthian narrator identifies in part with each of these characters and strategies, preventing the poem from resting in consistent doctrine and making the two alternatives seem moving and persuasive, yet mutually exclusive.

Burke, in his Reflections, however, claimed the availability of a synthesis: the British Constitution, as it developed through the Glorious Revolution of 1688, is an institutional form which commands his entire loyalty, and he finds in it that continuity or gradual variation—in short, beauty—that allows it to adapt to ongoing historical change. Half a century later Newman would find a parallel institutional synthesis in the developmental capability of the Catholic Church. Burke and Newman, therefore, avoided the dilemma which the former’s thought fathered and which “The Ruined Cottage” faces: how can anyone craving continuity survive the death of an old order?

The ruined Cistercian monastery mentioned in the title of “Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey” has a meaning homologous with Margaret’s ruined cottage at the end of the earlier poem: it is an emblem of a vanished order. Because Wordsworth is more interested in live options than dead ones, he relegates it to the periphery of the poem. If he had wanted to suppress it, he would not have put it into the title at all. But he wanted to consider how to live granted that once-commanding institutions, including some in his own lifetime, had lost their credibility. By turning his back on Gothic ruins in order to build anew, Wordsworth engages in a maneuver similar to Mary Wollstonecraft’s rejoinder in 1790 to Burke’s attack on the constitution-making of the French National Assembly:

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Why was it a duty to repair an ancient castle, built in barbarous ages, of Gothic materials? Why were the legislators obliged to rake amongst heterogeneous ruins; to rebuild old walls, whose foundation could scarcely be explored, when a simple structure might be raised on the foundation of experience, the only valuable inheritance our forefathers could bequeath?  
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The poem “Tintern Abbey” is about living among ruins, and its combination of a title with an abbey and a text without one results from its insistence on getting this emphasis straight.

The poem’s preoccupation with other sorts of residences makes the same point. The “vagrant dwellers in the houseless woods” (21), like the hermit in his cave (22), portray people trying to survive without man-made buildings. Among the referents of the “house” which they lack are a church and a state in which people can believe themselves at home. Those who appear homeless in this poem are not restricted to a marginal group of capitalism’s most impoverished victims, but are equivalent to the poet and his contemporaries, who have been let down, as he believed, by existing institutions. In the spirit of Armytage, however, Wordsworth in “Tintern Abbey” opts for the possibility of redirecting loyalties to a natural macrocosm. So he speaks of a “dwelling” (98) more capacious than any known to real estate agents and yet as available to everyone as each person’s own head:

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. . . .

(98–100)

And he undermines the restriction of gender seemingly implicit in this formulation by foreseeing his sister’s “mind” as “a mansion for all lovely [that is, beautiful] forms” (140–41) and her memory as “a dwelling-place” (142).

Although McGann and Levinson have suggested that “Tintern Abbey” assiduously cultivates a mystifying blindness to history, the relation between nature and history is the subject of the poem from its opening sentence. At first, the two categories seem antithetical: the poet, having lived through changes whose immensity is purposefully prolonged in the redundancy of “the length / Of five long winters,” marvels in reiterated “again”s that the landscape is still the same and still available to him. Nature’s permanence is set against humanity’s sense of history. History, like the human form, is absent from the observed landscape although not from the observer’s thoughts: farmers, vagrants, and hermits, like monks, tourists, and statesmen, are kept out of view, and, in contrast with Leonard’s alertness to certain or possible metamorphoses of a familiar place in Wordsworth’s “The Brothers,” nothing is said in “Tintern Abbey” about evidences of change in the scene itself. But the rest of the first verse paragraph begins to build a bridge between the segregated domains of nature and history by looking intently at spatial continuity, a visible model of “gradual variation”: land and sky, the
domesticated and the wild, one sector of ground and another merge spatially in this description without “sudden and unexpected” transitions. When Wordsworth recapitulates the scene in the phrase, “These forms of beauty” (24; cf. 128), he is using Burke’s aesthetic terminology with precision.

In the meditation which follows, he transfers the model of beauty or “gradual variation” from the natural and spatial realm to the human and temporal, claiming, first, that one exposure to a memorable landscape reverberates over time through a variety of areas of a person’s experience, some of them social (23–50); second, that repeated exposures over a period of years have changing meanings for the changing observer (59–112); and, last, that one person can transmit some of the fruits of maturation as a help or influence to someone who survives him (113–60). The argument shares Burke’s assumption that a need for continuity is central to the human experience of history, but it diverges substantially from Burke in refusing to find in British laws, traditions, and social and political institutions the embodiment of this value. Burke’s aesthetics and psychology are pried apart from his politics. Instead of deserting a critical stance to become a surreptitious tool of the British government, Wordsworth undermines the chief intellectual basis for the defense of the British Constitution in the 1790s. Nature is an accomplice.

The temporal continuity endorsed by Wordsworth is both horizontal and vertical. In the former sense, it connects an assortment of disparate but mundane moments according to either of two logics: “Nothing is lost as time passes” (23–59) or “Whatever is lost always gets exchanged for ‘abundant recompense’” (84–89). In the vertical sense, the poem’s temporal continuity amounts to a ladder which scales the metaphysical heights and permits the poet to experience the “sublime.” The word itself occurs twice in the text (38 and 96), at just those moments when the poem launches a clause or sentence that will culminate in religious experience, specifically a sense of awesome noumenal oneness behind the phenomenal multiplicity of things: “We see into the life of things” (50), and later,

A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things.

(101–3)

In its vertical dimension, the poem holds seeing the things to be superficial by contrast with seeing or feeling the oneness, yet concedes the tentativeness of the latter (36–37, 50–51, 88, 112). Wordsworth here builds on Burke’s association between the sublime and divinity (Enquiry
67–70), but Burke stresses a biblical God and, in Reflections, an established Christian church, while Wordsworth relies on natural religion and a slippery plainness of language that contrasts with the legalisms of church doctrine. Just as the horizontal temporal continuity is the poem’s alternative to Burke’s idea of the British Constitution, the poem’s vertical dimension is an independent-minded, partially skeptical alternative to any institutional church. The absence of the abbey from the text supports Wordsworth’s dismissal of the institutional structures that Burke and a succession of British governments fought to defend.

The poem’s most explicit linkage of nature and history occurs in the lines quoted earlier: “Knowing that Nature never did betray / The heart that loved her” . . . (123–124). A binary opposition is here implied: something never did betray vs. something which did indeed betray. The sense and force of the lines depend on recognizing what, for Wordsworth and his contemporaries, did betray. The Prelude of 1805 supplies relevant particulars. It identifies England’s entrance into a “confederated host” against France and its revolution in 1793 as an unprecedentedly severe trauma for Wordsworth and “all ingenuous youth” of his time (10.229–41); the hostilities, “this most unnatural strife” (10.250), continued in July 1798.11 The English church joined the state in betrayal by offering prayers for English victories, and Wordsworth recoiled in rage (10.263–74). In pursuing their war policy and stifling dissent, the leaders of the English state and church were “shepherds” perversely bent on “murder”:

Giants in their impiety alone,
But in their weapons and their warfare base
As vermin working out of reach, they leagued
Their strength perfidiously to undermine
Justice, and make an end of liberty.

(10.645–56)

The energy seething through this expression of contempt in the 1805 Prelude, when Wordsworth was likely to be less, not more, prone to censure British institutions than in 1798, suggests that the lines speak reliably of his sentiments in the period of “Tintern Abbey.” The first class of betrayers in the minds of the poet and his initial audience were the leaders of the institutions that Burke most revered.

Several months before the composition of “Tintern Abbey,” Coleridge had singled out another betrayer. In “The Recantation: An Ode” (later retitled “France: An Ode”) Wordsworth’s partner in the preparation of Lyrical Ballads had denounced France’s invasion of Switzerland in the early months of 1798 as a sell-out of its revolutionary ideals:

Are these thy boasts, champion of human kind?
To mix with Kings in the low lust of sway,
Yell in the hunt, and share the murd’rous prey;
T’insult the shrine of Liberty with spoils
From freemen torn; to tempt and to betray?12

(italics added)

The last word emphatically ends both a stanza and chain of rhymes, anticipating “Tintern Abbey” in its use of the crucial verb. When Coleridge’s poem appeared in The Morning Post on April 16, 1798, its views were strongly endorsed in an accompanying editorial introduction, which added significantly: “we know of no Friend to Liberty who is not of his opinion.” In the 1805 Prelude Wordsworth voiced similar sentiments about France’s perfidy to the same normative ideal:

And now, become oppressors in their turn,
Frenchmen had changed a war of self-defence
For one of conquest, losing sight of all
Which they had struggled for; and mounted up,
Openly in the view of earth and heaven,
The scale of Liberty.

(10.791–804)

There is no reason to think that the Wordsworth of “Tintern Abbey” disagreed. Like Mortimer in The Borderers, who operates independently in a space between the hostile powers of England and Scotland, and like Rivers, whose involvement in the Crusades took the form of criticism of both Christians and Moslems, Wordsworth came to see the warring institutional structures of both traditional England and revolutionary France as unsupportable. Both had turned in practice against “liberty.”

The competing ideologies which buttressed the antagonistic powers and clamored for the minds and hearts of European intellectuals through the 1790s had likewise lost their credibility for the poet of “Tintern Abbey.” The 1805 Prelude is scathing in its treatment of “the strife of phrase” (12.267), “false opinion and contentious thought” (11.260), and,
most memorably, “hissing factionists with ardent eyes” (9.57). There is Burkean irony in Wordsworth’s condemnation of himself in his earlier phase of rationalistic theorizing by using the language of “superstition”: “A bigot to a new idolatry” (11.75). But there is a symmetrically opposite Enlightenment irony in his condemning Burkean foes of the revolution with the language of skeptical alienation: “scoffers in their pride” (10.430). “Tintern Abbey” already implies its participation in a critique of ideologies through its symmetrically spatial and temporal relegations. The religious edifice of potentially Burkean values gets relegated to the poem’s title, where it is still spatially and evaluatively “a few miles” below, and the momentous revolutionary dates of the Fall of the Bastille (July 14, 1789), Federation Day (July 14, 1790), and Marat’s assassination (July 13, 1793) get relegated to a temporal near miss in the phrase closing the poem’s title, “July 13, 1798.” When Wordsworth says “Nature never did betray,” therefore, he makes a political and critical statement about what did betray, though it does not place him in either of the chief organized camps of his time and though it may be an unwelcome statement to readers identifying with one of those camps from the vantage point of a later time.

McGann, Chandler, and Levinson have assumed that Wordsworth’s affirmation of nature in “Tintern Abbey” necessarily implies a suppression of the historical, social, and political. In fact, Wordsworth here manipulates the ideologically charged discourse of the 1790s in order to reject any political position that suppresses freedom and denies to individuals the power or right to think independently. Nature as landscape is his setting and figure for free revisionist space, while nature as seascape has the same function in Coleridge’s “France: An Ode.” Recent critiques differ from these poets in refusing the honorific terms “politi-

13. For tentative but suggestive speculation that the revolutionary anniversaries were central to the poem’s meaning, see J. R. Watson, “A Note on the Date in the Title of ‘Tintern Abbey,’” The Wordsworth Circle 10 (1979): 379–80. Levinson 16, 55 finds the poem’s lack of focus on the anniversaries to be another betrayal.


cal” or “historical” to a political poetry founded on “liberty” as a central value. Levinson asserts that “private vision” is a mere construct by ideology (37–38) and deplores Wordsworth’s mystificatory “conversion of public to private property, history to poetry” (37). If no other choices exist by definition besides affiliation with one or another ideological bloc, Wordsworth’s free space is a vacuum. But a critic’s definitions can themselves be potent means to suppress unwanted segments of history.

The last of the betayers implicitly remembered in the poem is Wordsworth himself: not the revolutionary who changed his political views but the lover who had left behind in France in late 1792 a French woman, Annette Vallon, and his newborn or about-to-be born daughter by her. Yet the public and private sides of Wordsworth connect ideologically: in the realm of personal relationships Burkean particularism returns with a vengeance. The precise reason(s) for Wordsworth’s leaving his French lover and child and the morality of his decision are matters of conjecture. Two of Ms. Vallon’s unavailing letters imploring his return survive. The eruption of war between England and France made a return, if he wanted one, exceptionally difficult. For several years afterwards continuing into the spring of 1798, Wordsworth’s poetry—notably “The Ruined Cottage,” “The Thorn,” “The Mad Mother,” and “Peter Bell”—was recurrently, no doubt obsessively, populated by pregnant women and young mothers deserted by their lovers or husbands and suffering as a consequence poverty, loneliness, disgrace, madness, and death. Some of his other works of the same period, especially The Borderers, look more inclusively at betrayal, often in the form of abandonment.

Like the public betrayals treated earlier, Wordsworth’s private betrayal was connected with his seeking or finding free space from an institution, in this case the de facto family which he had established in France rather than a church, state, or ideological camp. But now the choice of liberty itself seemed to be the betrayal, and the poet—so at least one part of him insisted—was the betrayer. Institutional or political betrayal was interpreted by Wordsworth as a violation of liberty, but private or domestic betrayal could be a violation for liberty, as Rivers’ defense of his treachery makes explicit:

I seemed a Being who had passed alone  
Into a region of futurity,  
Whose natural element was freedom.  

(1818–20)

The remedy, if there could be any, for such betrayals had to supplement liberty with an infusion of adhesiveness.

“Tintern Abbey” claims that the poet’s maturation has followed just such a path:

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,  
Not harsh nor grating, though of ample power  
To chasten and subdue.  

(89–94)

The last line welcomes a curb on self-assertion in the name of a new sense of linkage with humanity. Yet the statements in this passage have seemed to some recent critics among the most deceptive and self-deceptive in the poem. Chandler argues that the actual difference between the Wordsworth of 1793 and that of 1798 is aptly summed up in the titles of the major projects which he was planning at the two times: The Philanthropist gets supplanted by The Recluse. It was in his unequivocally revolutionary phase, from this point of view, that he expressed solidarity with humanity; five years later he was bent on isolation, and “the poem seems an evasion of what he had actually stood for in 1793” (8–10). Levinson is characteristically more blunt: “the ‘still, sad music of humanity’ drowns out the noise produced by real people in real distress” (45). Here the critics seem to have caught Wordsworth red-handed in the act of betraying autobiographical, historical, and social truth.

Once again, however, he uses a terse negation to refer to an historically charged binary opposition: “Not harsh nor grating” (93) evokes some other human sounds which were indeed harsh and grating. Levinson is right in directing attention to the sounds of human “distress.” How did Wordsworth hear such sounds in 1793 by comparison with 1797–98? A comparison of his “Salisbury Plain” and “The Ruined Cottage” reveals a major difference. In the earlier poem Wordsworth attributed human suffering to “Oppression” (436) and “Th’Oppressor” (542). In the later one he attributed it to a combination of factors, including natural catastrophe (blight and fever [130, 149]), political misdeeds, not always to be blamed on a single set of culprits ("the plague of war" and economic
distress that ravages both rich and poor [136, 141–44], psychological disintegration, and inextricable mixtures of well-intentioned conduct, misjudgments, and irresponsibility by Margaret’s husband and herself. In 1793 Wordsworth blamed human suffering on the other guys; in 1797–98 he found the distinction between the malefactors and the victims often blurred and, in any event, insufficient to account for the web of tragedy in which all human beings are implicated. From the point of view of 1798, “Salisbury Plain” had grasped part of the truth but had lapsed into a rhetoric of oversimplification which substituted ideological stereotypes for accurate and balanced understanding. It was “harsh” and “grating,” like the calls to arms of both sides in the propaganda wars of the 1790s. In contrast with Levinson, Wordsworth was convinced that his revised perceptions, indebted as they were to his own agonized self-examination and his observations of historical change, gave him increased knowledge of “real people in real distress.” His sentence about learning to hear “The still, sad music of humanity” amounted, then, to a reasonably accurate summation of his new sense of the multiple sources of pain.

There is a major rhetorical difference, however, between the poem’s treatment of public and private betrayals. Granted the history shared by the poet and his contemporary readers, the terse negative statements examined earlier could communicate something of the public things which did betray and which were harsh and grating. A ruined abbey and July 13 in the title made contact with shared frames of reference. But nothing in the poem and no shared understanding spoke audibly about the private betrayal. The negative contrast, on this level, can only be completed by intimate friends privy to closely guarded secrets and to modern readers indebted to the detective work of generations of scholars.

Yet this negative contrast is equally real. Wordsworth’s protestations that he is “still / A lover” (103–4) of nature and that his “love” is now “warmer” and “holier” (155–56) than it used to be draws some of its meaning from a muffled contrast with that other love now severed, a love for Ms. Vallon. His sister, not Annette, is now his “dearest Friend” (116). He has moved beyond the “appetite,” “feeling,” “love,” and “dizzy raptures” of his “thoughtless youth” (81, 86, 91)—that is, on one level, the emotional turmoil of his relationship with the French woman, still too close for comfort in 1793—toward the sublimations of 1798. Like the “hermit” at the close of the poem’s first paragraph, he has opted in the present for celibacy, but without relinquishing generative-ness, as his claim to undecayed “genial spirits” (113) asserts. The talk of what his senses “half-create / And what perceive” (107–8) anticipates
the Prospectus to *The Recluse* in implying a fertile marital bond to nature in contrast to the human marriage which he escaped. The poem's last paragraph places his almost twenty-seven year old sister Dorothy (he was then twenty-eight) in the same structural position as the boy Hartley in Coleridge's recent "Frost at Midnight": she is the younger generation who continues the temporal progression of the conversation poem into the future. Coleridge had placed his own one and a half year old son in that position, but Wordsworth's five year old daughter in France is unmentionable. He can subtly articulate the negative shadow of his new affirmations in politics and religion, but he is tongue-tied about the corresponding negative shadow lurking behind his proclamations of love and fecundity.

The text repeats the author's earlier betrayal by effacing female presences constitutive of some of the poem's meaning. Not only Annette and Caroline, but Dorothy herself is slighted. She becomes a delayed echo of her brother,

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\text{in thy voice I catch} \\
\text{The language of my former heart, and read} \\
\text{My former pleasures in the shooting lights} \\
\text{Of thy wild eyes} \\
\text{(117–120)}
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instead of the forerunner and guide that he later acknowledges her to be:

She gave me eyes, she gave me ears;  
And humble cares, and delicate fears;  
A heart, the fountain of sweet tears;  
And love, and thought, and joy  
("The Sparrow's Nest" 17–20)

She, in the midst of all, preserved me still  
A poet, made me seek beneath that name  
My office upon earth, and nowhere else.  
(*The Prelude* 10.918–20)

In "Tintern Abbey" he infantilizes her to erase any need for a child's presence, and then denies her what Coleridge attributed to his son, a potential to surpass the adult poet.17

17. Margaret Homans, *Bearing the Word; Language and Female Experience in Nineteenth-Century Women's Writing* (1986; Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1989) 120 registers concisely Wordworth's subordination of his sister in "Tintern Abbey" to his own poetic needs,
Dorothy’s presence as friend, sister, and addressee is, on several levels in this poem, reduced to a sign of something else’s welcome absence. Godwin’s *Political Justice*, in a passage seminal for romantic conversation poems, such as “Tintern Abbey,” had condemned political associations for their inevitable production of “harangue and declamation.” Godwin continued: “We can seldom make much progress in the business of disentangling error and delusion but in sequestered privacy, or in the tranquil interchange of sentiments that take place between two persons.”18 Wordsworth remakes the unique person of his sister into a figure for the “small and friendly circles” (290) that Godwin constructs as meaning “not parliaments, political meetings, and mobs.” With her he trusts his words will be “Not harsh nor grating.” On a more buried level, she is equivalent to “not Annette” and “not the child.” But as a female with whom he has strong affective ties she is also another Annette and another Caroline. By diminishing her Wordsworth reveals his own defensiveness against Burkean particularism in its domestic form.

Alongside these gender-related betrayals, however, are moves toward a release from Burkean gender-based stereotypes. Burke’s prototype for the sublime is an encounter with an awesomely powerful father-figure, who may be the “dread majesty” of a king or the Old Testament God (*Enquiry* 67, 69–70). The sublime, for Burke, is never female, and Mary Wollstonecraft recognized as early as 1790 the restrictive implications of such an assumption for women’s access to power and autonomy.19 Burke’s prototype of the beautiful, on the other hand, is either a loving mother as perceived by a child or an attractive young woman as perceived by a stereotypical adult male, or some blurred mixture of the two. He repeatedly insists on weakness rather than strength in the beautiful and the female (110, 113, 116) and denies that a father can elicit the loving emotions associated with beauty (111). His model for the beautiful as “gradual variation”—the norm behind his celebration of the British Constitution and Wordsworth’s celebration of the landscape a few miles above Tintern Abbey—is the female body:


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and John Barrell, “The uses of Dorothy: ‘The Language of Sense’ in ‘Tintern Abbey,’” *Poetry, language, and politics* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1988) 137–67 stresses the poet’s wish that nature will postpone indefinitely Dorothy’s maturation to his own present level of cognitive development. An interesting alternative reading is Alan Bewell’s claim in *Wordsworth and the Enlightenment* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1989) 38–39 that Wordsworth is here criticizing a proto-revolutionary tradition of Enlightenment anthropology by bringing “the marginalized person as close as possible to the self.”
Observe that that part of a beautiful woman where she is perhaps the most beautiful, about the neck and breasts; the smoothness; the softness; the easy and insensible swell; the variety of the surface, which is never for the smallest space the same; the deceitful maze, through which the unsteady eye slides giddily, without knowing where to fix, or whither it is carried. Is not this a demonstration of that change of surface continual and yet hardly perceptible at any point which forms one of the great constituents of beauty? (115)

Taken in conjunction with Burke’s claim that the taste of milk to a child is an instance of beauty (154), we can observe that his merging together fantasies of the maternal and the erotic is starkly opposed to everything which he associates with the sublime and the masculine.

While Burke saw the sublime and the beautiful as opposite experiences, stemming from different objects and rooted in sexual difference, Wordsworth broke down barriers between them. Theresa Kelley is right to stress the “intriguing cooperation” between them in Tintern Abbey (Kelley 60); sometimes even “coalescence” is not too strong a word. The poem treats its moments of “sublime” religious experience as deriving from “These forms of beauty” (24) in the landscape:

Nor less, I trust,
To them I may have owed another gift,
Of aspect more sublime. . . .

(36–38)

The derivation is by a logic of gradual variation, not the abruptness of a voice out of the whirlwind; the moment of sublimity is also, inextricably, a moment in a beautiful temporal continuity. The “presence” that is “deeply interfused” through nature and the human mind (97–103) has all the gradual variation of a circumambient universe; yet to perceive it is “sublime” (96). The Wordsworthian speaker ends up as both a “lover” (104) and “worshipper of Nature” (153), that is, as someone experiencing admiration and reverence, which Burke had named as degrees of the sublime (Enquiry 57), for a divinity which is herself female and lovable: “Knowing that Nature never did betray / The heart that loved her . . .” (123–24; italics added). The Burkean version of sublime religious experience is opened out in a way that casts off long dominant western images of divinity-as-male and anticipates twentieth-century feminist recoveries of a conception of divinity which the theologian Elizabeth Johnson calls in the title of a recent book She Who Is.20

20. Elizabeth Johnson, She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse
The poet's sensitivity to multiple causes of human sorrow and his challenge to dominant gendered formulations of what mystics call the names of God amount to a significant—he might have thought abundant—recompense for the personal or domestic betrayal which haunted Wordsworth. It is sad that the line is so blurred in his case between guilt and discovery, but then to recognize the sadness without reviling or exculpating the man is to confirm his own perception of the "still, sad music of humanity."

The poem's politics, including its sexual politics, are not confined to its statements about "material reality" or "material and historical facticity." McGann (87) and Levinson (15), the writers of these normative phrases, presuppose in their critical practice that nothing is fully real except economic and political materialities. Some of their most effective rhetoric draws ironic force from the cultivation of a sense of vertigo at hanging over the abyss of unreality as the critic imitates the poet's shift to a different level of experience:

No passage in Wordsworth better conveys the actual moment when a spiritual displacement occurs—when the light and appearances of sense fade into an immaterial plane of reality, the landscape of Wordsworth's emotional needs. . . . Between 1793 and 1798 Wordsworth lost the world merely to gain his own immortal soul. (McGann 87–88)

In beholding from this green earth, in seeing into the life of things, the poet lost the ground he stood on and the teeming life of things. (Levinson 46)

These statements express with admirable irony and clarity a specific metaphysics, a position on what constitutes "reality" or "actuality." But the position is entirely unargued. Its persuasiveness—and its preferability to Wordsworth's quite different, though tentative, metaphysical assumptions—rests on the reader's acculturation into the materialist metaphysical assumptions of certain twentieth-century elites. As in the definition of history, the definition of reality becomes a device to erase divergent views.

“Tintern Abbey”’s moments of sublime access to a oneness that “rolls through all things” (103) displace two less inclusive models of oneness in eighteenth-century political discourse. Some passages in Rousseau translate his characteristic quest for intense unity or transparency into the elevation of a group mentality. Whatever impairs “social unity,” he argues in *The Social Contract*, is “worthless”: Christianity, for instance, by insisting on a moral authority independent of the sovereign general will. Rousseau’s model of a synchronic social cohesiveness at times hostile to ideological difference—though firmly based on the rule of law—is later applied and travestied in the Committee on Public Safety’s bloody campaign to insure political unanimity. Burke too promoted a model of unity: a diachronic scheme deriving political practices through inheritance from the customary and institutional past of a single society, allowing political renewal within the inherited structure, but guarding social cohesiveness by keeping the exits shut. “Tintern Abbey,” by contrast, claims to find a satisfying unity that energizes everything and excludes nothing:

A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things.

(101–03)

The oneness behaves like the Wye River, but it washes nothing away. Baptismal suggestions hover in the background; yet here there is no separation of sheep from goats, no casting out of devils, no removal of sin or corruption. This “motion” and “spirit” fail to dissolve difference, instead conferring sacral value upon it. For a poet who had lived through the recent efforts of both France and Britain to crush dissent, the political and social dimension of this statement would be inescapable. “Tintern Abbey” is Wordsworth’s declaration of independence from exclusivist models of cohesiveness and from the institutional structures that promote them. McGann’s comment is worth recalling: “Between 1793 and


1798 Wordsworth lost the world merely to gain his own immortal soul” (88). An amended version would be more accurate: “He gained a new respect and empathy for the world’s diversity by losing his own ideological purity.” But what he accomplished through cosmic affirmations in the poem’s sublime moments and supported through the broad sympathies of *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), where the poem first appeared, still needed to be embodied in his treatment of Annette, Caroline, and Dorothy. There are impressive breakthroughs in “Tintern Abbey,” and there is unfinished business.

Wordsworth’s poem, then, already grapples audaciously, subtly, and sometimes self-critically with the issue raised against it by recent critics—the topos and implied accusation of betrayal. Since the poem arrived there first, perhaps it has also earned the right to reflect on the commentaries that now cluster around it. But its standard of judgment is equivocal on whether some of the recent critiques themselves engage in betrayal. On the one hand, “Tintern Abbey” targets, often under the rubric of betrayal, tendencies in its own era that parallel influential late twentieth-century critical discourse about it: the attraction toward ideological stereotyping, the pressure to conform to preexisting ideological factions, the delegitimatization of individual liberty, and the susceptibility to impairments of balanced understanding caused by a lack of tragic sympathy and metaphysical openness. On the other hand, “Tintern Abbey”’s claim that “A motion and a spirit” “rolls through all things” hints that among the most seductive of betrayers is the trope of betrayal itself. The poem’s glimpses of a perspective from which even partial or reductive accounts can be seen as contributors to a positive process are another variant of Armytage’s refusal of subordinate partiality in favor of a commitment to macrocosmic beauty. Such Wordsworthian moments might serve as cautionary guides for critics or poets whose rhetorical quivers bulge with allegations of betrayal.

University of California, San Diego