

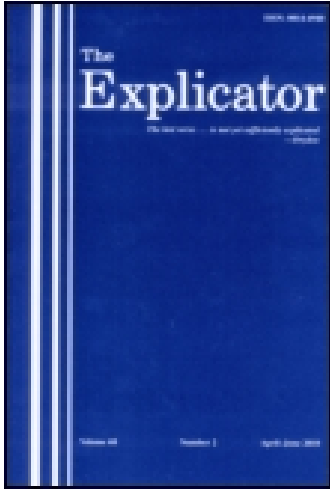
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Wordsworth's Tintern Abbey

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helps us complete our emotional and spiritual lives. With the word “sulk,” the angry speaker of “Infant Sorrow” shocks our perception but deepens our capacity for love.

—RICKS CARSON, *Atlanta*

Wordsworth's TINTERN ABBEY

In his reading of “Tintern Abbey” in *The Visionary Company*, Harold Bloom finds in the apostrophe to Dorothy a prayer that is “never quite expressed,” but which grows out of the poet’s “desire to be free of the fear that enters so early into the poet’s life and poem” (133). According to Bloom, the prayer is heralded in lines 121–23, the tone of which approaches desperation: “and this prayer I make, / Knowing that Nature never did betray / The heart that loved her.” In Bloom’s reading, the prayer itself is never directly voiced in the remainder of the poem. It is essentially an unspoken prayer for “more life, survival, imaginative immortality” (133). I would argue, however, that the prayer is in fact spoken in the lines immediately preceding those that Bloom sees as heralding it: “Oh! yet a little while / May I behold in thee what I was once, / My dear, dear, Sister! (119–21).

When lines 119–23 are read in this way, the prayer becomes the explicit expression in lines 119–21 of the poet’s desire to sustain the vision of his former self in the person of his sister, Dorothy. The tone of the prayer is a blend of urgency and resignation. “Yet a little while” acknowledges the inevitability of change, and the temporal nature of the vision. The prayer’s urgency grows out of the importance of the vision as a book in which to read former pleasures, as confirmation that the poet’s subjective experience is shared by another human being, and is thus, at least to some degree, validated. Perhaps most important of all, in his vision, the poet is imaginatively united with his former self, with his sister, and with Nature itself, as it is Nature that has taught him thus to see.

If my reading is correct, the lines immediately following the prayer express not a fear bordering on desperation, although they certainly are meant to ward off fear, but a statement of faith in Nature’s power, which enables the prayer itself:

and this prayer I make,
Knowing that Nature never did betray

The heart that loved her; 'tis her privilege,
 Through all the years of this our life, to lead
 From joy to joy: for she can so inform 125
 The mind that is within us, so impress
 With quietness and beauty, and so feed
 With lofty thoughts, that neither evil tongues,
 Rash judgments, nor the sneers of selfish men,
 Nor greetings where no kindness is, nor all 130
 The dreary intercourse of daily life,
 Shall e'er prevail against us, or disturb
 Our cheerful faith, that all which we behold
 Is full of blessings.

The assertive, assured tone of these lines has often been noted, and some readers, such as Albert Gérard, have found them anticlimactic because they lack the imaginative energy of earlier passages (113). Certainly the lines have received much less commentary than the more famous sections of the poem. It is important to note, however, that the assured tone of lines 128–33 derives, at least in part, from their close resemblance to passages in the New Testament. In fact, Wordsworth's lines conflate the rhythms and phrases of two New Testament texts whose content is relevant to the poem. The catalogue beginning ". . . neither evil tongues, / Rash judgments, nor the sneers of selfish men" echoes the structure and rhythm of St. Paul's declaration of the stability and power of Christ's love:

For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom. 8:38–39)

Paul's answer to the rhetorical question, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" (Rom. 8:35) is naturalized in Wordsworth's enumeration of the ills of the human world over which Nature will triumph, and the fear of separation from God's love implicit in the Pauline passage has its counterpart in the poet's prayer that his unifying vision of man and Nature might last. Moreover, the words, "Shall e'er prevail against us, or disturb / Our cheerful faith" recall Christ's reply to Peter's great confession of faith: "Upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matt. 16:18). In Wordsworth's myth of salvation, the gates of hell are replaced by the evils of the adult world, the love of God by the healing power of Nature, and the institutional church by the cheerful faith of those who respond imaginatively to Nature's ministrations.

M. H. Abrams has written, "[W]e pay inadequate heed to the extent and persistence with which the writings of Wordsworth . . . reflect not only the language and rhythms but also the design, the imagery, and many of the central moral values of the Bible . . ." (32). It is especially interesting that the end of

"Tintern Abbey," a poem that Harold Bloom has called "a history in little of Wordsworth's imagination," should echo two New Testament passages of such doctrinal weight spoken by the two greatest voices of New Testament authority, Christ and St. Paul (127). These echoes underscore what is at stake for the speaker in the poem: nothing less than the construction of a new myth of salvation. Their presence suggests as well Wordsworth's confidence in the authority of his prophetic vision, a confidence that wins out, in this poem, over the poet's fears.

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Coleridge's CHRISTABEL, lines 23–42

That strange fragment, *Christabel*,¹ begins at midnight as Christabel ventures alone into the forest beyond her father's castle to pray "for her lover that's far away" (line 30). A "furlong from the castle gate" (26) she kneels beneath "a huge, broad-breasted, old oak tree" (42), only to be startled by a moan coming from the opposite side of the tree (39–42). The sound emanates from the lovely Geraldine, "perhaps the most extraordinary of all Coleridge's poetic creations [and] an embodiment of pure sexual energy," who corrupts Christabel in a bedroom scene replete with suggestions of vampirism and witchcraft.²

What appears to have escaped notice in this initial forest scene is the symbolism inherent in Coleridge's spatial configuration. Of all his longer poems, *Christabel* is the "most deliberately invented [and] contrived," according to Holmes (290), and the placement of Geraldine in the forest constitutes an example of such artifice. The distance Christabel steals into the woods, a furlong, is an eighth of an English statute mile, or 660 feet (in the poet's day, as well as our own).³ Coleridge imagines Christabel at this distance from the castle gate and Geraldine but a few feet beyond: as Christabel kneels beneath the tree, Geraldine is "near, as near can be" (39), only a tree-trunk away, as it were. As