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"Thoughts That Do Often Lie Too Deep for Tears": Toward a Romantic Concept of Lyrical Drama

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Near the end of his influential essay on the Immortality Ode, Lionel Trilling surmises that "thoughts that lie too deep for tears are ideally the thoughts which are brought to mind by tragedy" and summarily comments that "It would be an extravagant but not an absurd reading of the Ode that found it to be Wordsworth's farewell to the characteristic mode of his poetry . . . and a dedication to the mode of tragedy. But the tragic mode could not be Wordsworth's." 1 Trilling's extravagance comes at the expense of his own argument, which had begun by rejecting the conventional reading of the Ode as Wordsworth's conscious farewell to his art; 2 for even though Trilling describes the forecast of tragedy as a dedication to a new poetic subject, insofar as it is both a farewell to what is Wordsworthian in the poet's art and a promise never to be fulfilled, the last line of the Ode is freighted with pathos.

In the words of the poem, however, not tragedy but "the meanest flower that blows" brings to mind "thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears." Wordsworth surely knew that tragedy had not traditionally been assigned such a task. Exceedingly rich and various, eighteenth-century tragic theory proposed explanations of the kinds of pleasures tragedy ideally provides which ranged from versions of Aristotle's principles of catharsis and mimesis to variations on the Lucretian return on the self. 3 But whatever design by which tragedy was said to achieve its ends, theorists agreed that tragedy deserved its rank as the noblest form of dramatic art, capable rival of epic narrative, because it brought to the mind thoughts too high for tears, filled and elevated the mind with exalted conceptions. It is likely that tragedy, certainly as the eighteenth century conceived it, is meant to fall under the general proscription of "supposed Height" that Wordsworth announces in the Preface to Lyrical Ballads; his programmatic removal to "safe ground" is explicable in part as a retreat from tragic means and aims. 4

Tragic theory was not, however, the same as tragic practice. As it was staged in the later eighteenth century, tragedy was most esteemed for its sensationally sentimental capacity to bring "thoughts" just right for tears. One account, from a review of the Edinburgh opening of John Home's A New Tragedy, Douglas (the great weepy hope of Scottish tragic theatre), may suffice as example of the general standard of taste: "The applause was enthusiastic, but a better criterion of its merits was the tears of the audience, which the tender part of the drama drew forth unsparingly." 5 This criterion of merit, the capacity to draw forth what Keats called "barren Tragedy-tears," 6 was distasteful to Wordsworth, who repudiated that standard in one of his few explicit comments on tragedy: "We [Wordsworth and Klopstock] talked of tragedy," he notes; "he seemed to rate too highly the power of exciting tears. I said that nothing was more easy than to deluge an audience. That it was done every day by the meanest writers." Wordsworth's objection to the tidal powers of contemporary tragedy is of a piece with his contemptuous dismissal of "sickly and stupid German Tragedies" and other forms of violent and disgusting sensation in Preface to Lyrical Ballads. 7

Wordsworth does not work toward tragedy, he works through it--especially in the Immortality Ode, where the difficulties attendant on the project of carrying "relationship and love" intimately involve the problem of genealogy. 8 The epigraph, which divides between the proposition that "The Child is Father of the Man" and the conditional "wish" for days to be "Bound each to each by natural piety," designs the Ode, as an oedipal drama that is never brought to catastrophe or resolution. 9 Indeed, the fulfillment of the wish for a binding natural piety depends on the overcoming of the potential for tragedy in the relations of child and father.

If the topic is genealogy and the tendency is deeper, the synthetic metaphor is descent--an uncongenial metaphor for the sublimity of tragedy but apt for the "complex and revolutionary" pathos that Wordsworth defines in the 1815 "Essay Supplementary to the Preface" and which in turn describes the mental passage in the Ode: "There is also a meditative, as well as a human, pathos; and enthusiastic, as well as an ordinary, sorrow; a sadness that has its seat in the depths of reason, to which the mind cannot sink gently of itself--but to which it must descend by treading the steps of thought" (Prose, III, 83). The Immortality Ode is the splendid example of this "profound passion," which eludes both the awful reverence of an inhuman sublime and the ordinary tears of an all too human pathos. Natural piety is staged in the poem, and particularly in stanzas VII-IX, as an art of sinking in a step by step descent from father to son to man--a genealogy of thoughts. 10

Unlike the Virgilian descent, the Wordsworthian begins with a flower that is not plucked but read, which tells a tale put in the form of two questions: "Whither is fled the visionary gleam?/ Where is it now the glory and the dream?" (55-56). The three sections of stanzas V, VI-VII, and VII-IX propose answers to those questions; but I shall confine my analysis to the last, where the answer is, in effect, a correction of the nature of the questions.

Before the child can father, it must be a child with its own paternity. The paternity of the child who, in one guise or another, is the subject of stanzas V-IX is "God" (65) or "Immortality" (119), and the complex affiliations between father and child are most intensely reflected on in stanza VIII. The six-year-old child is initially lauded for yet keeping a "heritage" that makes him an "Eye among the blind" (112). That eye is not put to the service of the blind, however, but directed backward to the gracious source of light and sight. And although called "Seer blest" (115), the mighty eye is not merely a visionary camera; it reads: "thou Eye among the Blind,/ That deaf and silent, reads't the eternal deep" (112-13). To be stationed at the edge of the eternal deep is, by sublime paradox, the "being's height" (123). A correlative of the "Soul's immensity," which the child's "exterior semblance doth belie" (110, 109), the eternal deep is in the child but of the father--an extension in the child of the eternity of the godhead, which appears to the child like one of those ghostly scripts so common in Wordsworth: read not out of spontaneous reverence but because the child is "Haunted for ever by the eternal mind" (114). His heritage a haunting, the child's only privilege at his being's height is to read the will of an eternal father, a legacy that is the condition of and on his privilege. The difference between what is his and what is the father's constitutes the text read by the child positioned on the margin between who he is and where he came from. Or at least one supposes. It is constitutive of the meditative distance between ourselves and the seer that we cannot look over his shoulder to see what he reads but must read him reading

and infer the conditions of his privilege from an exterior semblance that belies.

Constrained by the despotism of the spritual eye and shouldering the truths that rest on him, all that unfixes the child is the unrest of his reading. Hence the answer to the poet's rhetorical question (asked of a child not here and who could not hear), "Why with such earnest pains dost thou provoke/ The years to bring the inevitable yoke,/ Thus blindly with thy blessedness at strife?" (124-26), seems clear: the child summons the years that he may exchange marginal uneasiness for earnest pains, forget a haunting blessedness beneath the hard fact of an earthly yoke. But the poet's imposing rhetoric forestalls easy answers. If the child has provoked the future, the poet provokes the past as, with forgetfulness at strife, he depicts the child's plight in language that limns the oedipal nexus of tragedy: the child's "freedom" is entailed by the epithet "heaven-born" (123); he is blessed by an "Immortality" that "Broods" over him like a "Master over a Slave" (119-20). The poet tropes uneasiness as strong ambivalence and implies a choice: the child could surrender to the mastery of Immortality, or he could, in the fashion of Oedipus, turn to confront the father, either to murder or transcend. But the child neither succumbs to the father nor succeeds to the sublime; instead he turns away from his patrimony, summons the years, and flees from being's height to begin his grave descent. Now there is nothing odd about the child's flight and the repression of his ambivalence, but peculiar are the poet's endorsement of slavery and his supercilious representation of the choice of the child, so-called eye among the blind, as a blind striving. What is especially odd is that the thought of this repressive turn, flight, and descent is followed by "O joy!" (130).

The poet's joy is odd because it marks his nearest approach to a thought too great for tears, to that delight which Edmund Burke identified as tragic affect, but which seems an indecorous response to an evasion of tragic conflict. The poet explains his joy (and in explaining again transgresses sublime decorum) as his reaction to the discovery that "nature yet remembers/ What was so fugitive" (132-33). Now "fugitive" is usually referred to the transient glory of the soul, surprisingly persistent in the memory of mortal nature. But "fugitive" is equally descriptive of and more proximate to the buried child who has blindly fled his father. And if, as Thomas Weiskel has observed in The Romantic Sublime (1976) of Burke's theory of the sublime, "Delight is what you feel on escaping from the bewildering emotions and consequences surrounding a [real or imagined] murder (p. 89), it would seem that Wordsworth's dramatic joy must be something different, for it is provoked not by escape from a murder real or imagined but by evasion of a conflict that might have led to the thought of a murder. Like tragic delight, the poet's joy prepares a renewal of power, but the poet's power appears only as the capacity to recollect what has been repressed--not a cathartic release from consequences but an acceptance of the return of all consequences all over again--without tears.

We can address the significance of this moment by comparing the recollection of this fugitive with the tragic scene of wonder and awe in the Iliad cited by Burke and elaborated by Weiskel as an example of the oedipal complexity of the sublime moment. Burke quotes four lines (590-93) from Pope's translation of the scene in Book 24 of the Iliad, when Priam suddenly appears before Achilles to plead for the body of Hector. Weiskel quotes the context:

Unseen by these, the King his entry made;  
And prostrate now before Achilles laid,  
Sudden, (a venerable Sight!) appears;  
Embrac'd his Knees, and bath'd his Hands in Tears;  
Those direful Hands his Kisses press'd, embru'd  
Ev'n with the best, the dearest of his Blood!

As when a Wretch, (who conscious of his Crime  
Pursu'd for Murder, flies his native Clime)  
Just gains some Frontier, breathless, pale!  
All gaze, all wonder: Thus Achilles gaz'd  
Thus stood th' Attendants stupid with Surprize;  
All mute, yet seem'd to question with their Eyes:  
Each look'd on other, none the Silence broke,  
Till thus at last the Kingly Suppliant spoke,

Ah think, thou favour'd of the Pow'rs Divine!  
Think of thy Father's Age, and pity mine!  
In me, that Father's rev'rend Image trace,  
Those silver Hairs, that venerable Face:  
His trembling Limbs, his helpless Person, see!  
In all my Equal, but in Misery! (584-603)

Weiskel notes that "for the moment anger is suspended--sublimated--into wonder. Priam has cleverly assumed the role of the father in Achilles' mind, thereby engaging in his own interest powerful prohibitions against anger and parricide." He goes on to generalize that, "Wonder, the 'sense of awe' Burke will find in the sublime moment, is the affective correlative of a positive 'identification' with the Father, an identification which both presupposes the renunciation of parricidal aggression and facilitates an escape from the imagined consequences of a murder (pp. 90-91). I would like to stress the momentary quality of this sublime awe, suspension, and identification, as does Pope, who in his commentary on the passage (24.643-39) remarks on (what Weiskel parenthetically acknowledges) Priam's acute perception of the striking effect the paternal image has and who calls attention to the way the king "sets him [Achilles' father] before his [Achilles'] Imagination by this Repetition, and softens him into Compassion. (Twickenham ed., VIII, 562 n.). This compassion, Wordsworth's "human pathos," issues in what Wordsworth has led us to suspect:

These Words soft Pity in the Chief inspire,  
Touch'd with the dear Remembrance of his Sire.  
Then with his Hand (as prostrate still he lay)  
The Old Man's Cheek he gently turn'd away.  
Now each by turns indulg'd the Gush of Woe;  
And now the mingled Tides together flow. . . . (634-39)

Like the meanest tragedian, Priam deluges his audience with tears; like the amateur he is, he gets caught up in the flood that annihilates not only the awful integrity and positive identification of the sublime moment but all distinctions whatever: between Hector and Achilles' father, between Priam and Achilles, between the two principals and the attendants, who join in "One universal, solemn Show'r . . ." (645).

The Homeric scene is a remarkable collection of familiar Wordsworthian topoi, assembled as if by negatives; and it is a suggestive illustration of the relationship between sublimity and beauty adumbrated by Wordsworth in his fragmentary essay on their respective provinces and powers. Like Burke, Wordsworth affirms that the sublime and the beautiful can "coexist" in the same object, even though they cannot act on the perceiver simultaneously: "the sublime always precedes the beautiful in making us conscious of its presence . . ." (Prose, III, 82). The sublime precedes the beautiful as the stunning effect of Priam's sudden manifestation precedes his eloquent utterance, during which he contrives a subtle weave of repetition that produces the soft languor which Burke in A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful describes as an effect of the beautiful (ed. Boulton, [1968], pp. 50-51). Tears, which Burke does not mention, follow. What, it may be asked, could Wordsworth have found offensive in such a turning of sublimity into human pathos? Observe the consequence of tears. The action resumes in The Iliad with the heroes "Siate at length" (647), but Pope, who has already read to the end of the poem, cancels this new beginning in his note to line 634: "We are now come almost to the end of the Poem, and consequently to the end of the Anger of Achilles . . ." (Pope, Iliad, 563, n.). Once foreseen, the consequences cannot be aborted; human pathos has mortal consequences for mimetic narrative: the tears occur near the end of the poem; they mark the end of the anger of Achilles; consequently, like a deluge they sweep away Achilles, who is his anger, and drown the remainder of the Homeric epic in what Coleridge would call Wordsworthian pathos. Wordsworth's own evasion of the tragic prevents the tears that would dissolve those distinctions--the reading of which is life. Taking joy in the recollection of a repressed fugitive is to bring nothing to an end; instead it is to accept the legible pathos of repression after repression: a continual deepening that yields its "complex and revolutionary" returns to the eye that steadily cons the mental deep, continually evading a recognition of what it reads.

The joyous recollection prepares another scene which evokes oedipal complications:

Not for these I raise  
 The song of thanks and praise;  
 But for those obstinate questionings  
 Of sense and outward things  
 Fallings from us, vanishings;  
 Blank Misgivings of a Creature  
 Moving about in worlds not realised,  
 High instincts before which our mortal Nature  
 Did tremble like a guilty Thing surprised. . . . (140-148)

This passage revised the earlier scene in stanza VIII: "high instincts" conform to the soul's project at its "being's height," and mortal nature corresponds to the fugitive. By depicting a dualism this side of eternity, however, the revision advances the Ode one more step in its meditative descent. "Descent" not only because one scene follows another farther down the page and seems to come from deeper in the poetic memory, but because if in his provoking of the years the fugitive enacts a repressive turn away from his immortal legacy, the obstinate questioning is descendant from that repression: it too turns away from the eternal deep and from contest with the immortal father. If that turn is not, like its predecessor, with its blessedness at strife but, on

the contrary, about its father's blessed business, it is because the precedent of the mortal nature offers a target to turn toward and against, a surrogate for the immortal master who is privileged by repression in order that days might be bound each to each in a pathetic descent which will not produce awe or tears but will "call forth and bestow power of which knowledge is the effect . . ." (Essay, Supplementary to the Preface [1815], Prose, III, 82). The descent of reading to strife, then, devolves into questioning that in turn represses its descent by interrogating the mortal nature, which starts back "as if a guilty Thing surprised."

Why guilty? If anything the persistence of the memory of the obstinate soul reasserts the failure of the mortal nature to murder or even threaten the master light. I would suggest that the emergence of this guilty figure marks a crucial threshold in the downward passage of the stanza. As the repressed power of the flight from the father is transferred to the pious soul, so, the source of these lines suggests, does the child cross over into father. The line of guilt has been persuasively glossed as an echo of Horatio's remark on the reaction of the ghost of Hamlet's father to the crowing of the cock: "And then it started like a guilty thing/ Upon a fearful summons" (I, i, 148-49)--an echo which implies for the Ode the translation of haunted child into haunting father and identifies the guilt not as a consequence of a crime committed by a son against the father but for a crime about to be committed against the son. 11 The child is father of the man. Here that father halts on the threshold between the poet and his being's height, haunting the future of the man who will have to assume the heritage of his mortal nature. The poet's stern lack of sympathy for the fugitive in stanza VIII is explained by the intervention of this ghost which bars him from participation in what he recollects by fathering his distance from the source of light. Nonetheless, that repression is the condition of the poet's capacity to recollect, to observe a vital distance, and to acquire the power that descends to him as his thoughts deepen.

With a choice of fathers the poet may reject the mortal for the immortal, choose "the master-light of all our seeing" (156). Yet the continuity to which the poet adheres qualifies the identification to which he aspires. The repudiation of the mortal nature permits the poet to silence phenomenal noise and to repeat the scene at the margin of the eternal deep, now revised so that the particular child in whom was lodged all privilege and all possibility, becomes "Children" (167), who, with no eyes for the deep, do not suffer the act of reading but sport innocently on the shore. But revision is not vision. Although the poet affirms a return, what he sees is not the gift of a sublime transcendence but the consequence of restless thought. Linked into the stages of the poem by the "Hence" (162), the seashore scene is an exterior semblance of vision, which the poet has the ability to see only because he has the mortal power to read.

The inconclusiveness of that wishful thought characterizes the tension of the Ode: the poet stages his past in tragic figures (as Freud tells us he must, if they are to be staged at all) 12 within a meditation that evades a tragic dynamics which would transcend then deluge human suffering. Despite its repression, the intimation of immortality does persist and can be read beneath the belying of exterior semblance. But, because of its repression, that intimation can only be read as part of a mortal descent into which the fugitive fits like a dark glass. The poet is the father's child as he is the child's father. Although immortality be the master light of all our seeing, all we

see comes to us transcribed in the ineradicable characters of our mortality. In recollecting the paternity from which no tragic act has severed him, the poet recalls a genealogy of repression, of which his recalcitrant reading is the legacy--a bestowal of power, if not of an effective knowledge. The distance the poet travels from stanza VIII to the end is a descent from a recollected reading of an eternal deep by a privileged child of light down the steps of thought toward the deepening of all semblances, fugitives between the first light and final deluge. Repetition has been bound to an orderly descent that works through the same question without the compensation of easy or final answers that could harmonize or reconcile. In natural piety the poet concludes; he acknowledges his legacy as the gift of a semblance that will always belie and often brings thoughts too deep for tears.

I should not suppress that it is the "human heart" (201) that Wordsworth gratefully identifies as the bestower of his sober receptiveness. Yet it is in line with the spirit of the text, in which all identifications are specious, to suspect Wordsworth's profession here. Certainly it would be impossible for the poet to thank meditative pathos, for it is the quality of that declension of mind not to be able to refer to itself--that is, to be incapable of positing an elevation from which consciousness, spectator ab extra, could congratulate the mind on the method of its acting. Self-consciousness, the stagey gesture that approves the hypostasis of head and heart so dear to Romantic psychology, belongs to the tragic theatricality of human pathos. Indeed, I would ally myself, albeit somewhat gingerly, with those who have, as a policy of taste or principle, withheld their applause from Romantic exploits of self-consciousness. Self-consciousness, as it has been conventionalized by Romantic poets and critics, is not a wound of the soul but a weakness for the limelight. The knowing ecstasis of self-consciousness transports the mind out of itself in order to place it dead center on the stage of history so that "I" can tearily watch myself suffer. This weakness is not foreign to Wordsworth, of course: it has been the subject of brilliant commentary, received its full measure of praise and blame. But it is my argument that the Immortality Ode ought to be politely withdrawn from the visionary company. Wordsworth does not face human suffering. He does not face it because it cannot be seen by the poet at large in the world any more than it can be seen by spectators gaping at stagelit actors. On the defective vision of a theater audience Charles Lamb is all but authoritative:

Some dim thing or other the spectators see; they see an actor presenting a passion, of grief, or anger for instance, and they recognize it as a copy of the usual external effects of such passions; or at least as being true to that symbol of the emotion which passes current at the theater for it, for it is often no more than that: but of the grounds of the passion, its correspondence to a great or heroic nature, which is the only worthy object of tragedy,--that common auditors know anything of this, or can have any such notions dinned into them by the mere strength of an actor's lungs--that apprehensions foreign to them should be thus infused into them by storm, I can neither believe, nor understand how it can be possible. 13

Lamb is all but authoritative because Wordsworth does not equate the theatrical with Drury Lane, nor exempt the worthiest objects of tragedy from the class of "dim things" that obstruct the descent to the grounds of human passion. Noth-



ing "human" is alien to a tragic scenario that progresses from conflict to climactic transcendence and closes with a curtain of tears. The poet's return to a flower brings him back to exactly what is not the face of human suffering because in whatever mask that face might appear, the witness of the human would be suborned to tragic testimony for theatrical convenience. It is both pathetic and an occasion for further meditation that the poet must depersonify to deepen, if not fully unmask, the human; he must remark on semblances that belie in order to be true to life.

What is life? Life for the critic is a line to be read: "Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears." That critical reading lines up behind, descends from, the poet's "own" reading of the line of descent which makes legible the "meanest flower that blows." And, to string out the word one more sentence, that descent is a line of readings. What is reading? Surely a difficult question. But an answer can be suggested by noting that reading, or at least the Wordsworthian reading of the Ode, has an uncertain structure which can be tracked, if not fully determined, by marking its deviance from a more categorical norm.

Such a norm is proposed by Kenneth Burke in the "Dialectic of Tragedy" section of A Grammar of Motives (1945). There Burke cites the Greek proverb "ta pathemata mathemata," the sufferer is the learned, and argues that to complete the proverb "at the risk of redundancy" would require reference to an initial action. The true tragic grammar is realized, Burke says, by the sequence "poiemata, pathemata, mathemata, suggesting that the act poiemata organizes the opposition (brings to the fore whatever factors resist or modify the act), that the agent thus 'suffers' this opposition, and as he learns to take the oppositional motives into account, widening his terminology accordingly, he has arrived at a higher order of understanding" (rpt. 1969, pp. 39-40). The dialectic could hardly be more symmetrical: Burke opposes the tragic Greek proverb in order to make it proverbialize Greek tragedy; the realization of a tragic grammar requires the assembling of the proverbial act into a higher order of understanding. The providential calculus of dialectic brings the classical to a climax in our knowledge. Whether Burkean, Coleridgean, Frankfortian, or Bloomian, dialectic translates poetry into criticism and transfigures us dialecticians into the higher, even the highest, critics--the last comers to a cultural stageplay whose finale is cued to our long awaited arrival. From this perspective the exemplum of Priam's scene in Homer's epic can be generalized and dialectic conceived of as the intersection of drama and narrative. This is true whether we consider the Burkean schema of first action, then suffering, and, finally, knowledge, or whether we think of dialectic in terms of the oedipus complex, which posits family drama as family romance, the structure of tragedy as the story of one's life.

The story of Wordsworth cannot be so neatly rationalized, however. Indeed, if the power of understanding inheres in the topographical paradox that to stand under is to be higher, Wordsworth's wholly unparadoxical strength as a poet is that, as Coleridge continually reminds us, he understands nothing. Again and again Wordsworth rejects the dialectical lure, to which all Coleridgeans are susceptible, the bait which tempts the epigone to complete Greek proverbs, to assemble tragedy from classical ruins according to the mathematics of a supposedly higher grammar. There is nothing of the classical about Wordsworth. If the fugitive allusion to Pope's "Homer" in the Immortality Ode is convincing, then it should follow that Wordsworth's repudiation of the tragic

scene casts out not only the Homeric ethos but its neo-classical redaction as well. But even should that argument want killing force, only lack of space prevents a cataloging of Wordsworth's less oblique dismissals not only of classical precedents and neo-classical grammars but of the very notions of precedent and grammar which "classical" implies. And it is only the grammarians' funereal impulse that tries to strap Wordsworth to ratios of revision. Rather than assemble proverbs into grammars, Wordsworth might be said to deproverbi-alize tragedy according to the rarely grammatical dissemblance of repression: he does not impose the formula 'to act, suffer, and know'; he adheres to the repetitive process 'to act, to suffer, to act, to suffer'--an interminable series in which each cause is the effect of its effect, under its own influence. Or, as Wordsworth intimates: like father, like son, like father. Each term, moment, or character is constituted by its repression of its affiliations with the other; each is an exterior semblance latent with its supposed antithesis. The sequence plots no resolution; instead it configures thought as an indefinite dissembling in which each character is doubly distinguished: as its disguise of itself and as the obstinate questioner of its neighbor. The sequence 'act, suffer, act, suffer' represents reading as a differential movement through a tissue of latencies. One always reads along the same lines, always, however, sinking deeper. The line of reading, to paraphrase D. H. Lawrence, is no free fall. It is a narrow, tight descent, where the mind meditates hemmed in by compulsions. That's nothing to cry about. The Romantic complicity of dissembling characters--the never quite understood differential of an action that is already suffering and a suffering already acting evades the human pathos of tragic knowledge and adumbrates what I would describe as the generic equivalent of meditative pathos: lyrical drama.

The concept of a lyrical drama is not Robert Langbaum's invention; nor is it my own; nor is its application to the Immortality Ode more than a slight anachronism; it is, of course, the subtitle that Shelley attached to Prometheus Unbound, a term, however, curiously isolated in Romantic literary history, un-commonly overlooked in critical commentary--a hybrid which, though it could not have come from nowhere and has not dropped out of sight, appears to have no natural father and no child. <sup>14</sup> Unlike the ideal of the myth, which, as Earl Wasserman describes it in Shelley (1971), is composed of "eternal mental possessions" which ask "to be interwoven into a beautiful whole 'containing within itself the principle of its own integrity'" (p. 272), the lyrical drama is an unpropertied child of contradictions, a composite which is itself the act and suffering of its potential disintegration. Lyrical insofar as it is the aspiration of ego, a song transcribed for one voice, and composed of imagery "drawn from the operations of the human mind"; <sup>15</sup> dramatic in that what is the mind is a scene, not simply an agent--the lyrical drama is passionate and implicit, not theatrical. As a drama of thought which can neither be staged nor closeted, the lyrical drama does not so much take place in the depths of the mind as continually displace the mind in an indefinite deepening, which is unmotivated and unlimited by the teleological and topographical prejudice of a destined profound. To risk a tentative definition: lyrical drama is the pathetic representation of the mind in the meditative passage of characters.

Among the consequences that follow from such a definition, several are especially salient. First, to begin the criticism of lyrical drama presupposes an abandonment of the familiar epistemological theme in Romantic criticism. Instead of a problem of knowledge or understanding, the lyrical drama presupposes a problem of reference. One does not ask, that is, which is prior

or ulterior, subject or object? Or, can the self ever know an other through a poetry of experience? One does not project a bookkeeping of the dialectical profit taken by a knowing subjectivity. Instead one asks, to what do the characters in meditative passage refer? Is that reference constant? To what are we to refer for the production and reproduction of these characters? Are those operations rule governed, mechanical, or, perhaps, indeterminate? Is the pathos of meditation reducible to the coercion (or, perhaps, the license) of reference? To propose a genre as a problem of reference rather than a project of knowing is another way of opting for the tension of reading instead of the quiet pride of understanding.

A second point, closely associated with the first, is that although the concept of a lyrical drama brackets the questions regarding the transactions of subject and object--indeed, all questions of knowledge--the consequence is neither a simple idealism nor a horrific solipsism. For this is a drama of the mind, not in the mind. Not an hypothetical ideal or an hallucination of diseased self-regard, the drama of the mind is a formal contrivance; it follows a script and is represented in characters which are orthographical dramatis personae fully fledged by an inky plume. Like the words of Prometheus' curse these characters can be recalled, dissembled, and read, yet never fully known for what they are, never finally erased. If the characters of lyrical drama will not pose as beautiful idealisms, they cannot be antithetically consigned to the inert state of mere things either. They are, to employ once again Wordsworth's resonant term, exterior semblances--seemings whose materiality appears as the curious effect of a kind of rich redundancy (What, after all, would an interior semblance be? Is not semblance logically always the false front on authentic innerness?)--a redundancy that characterizes the materiality of the signifier by attributing to it a depth, however insubstantial, and a potential for dramatic conflict, however irresolvable. Once again, one cannot know what cannot reasonably be assigned to the ideal or the material; one can but read the differentials or, better, the intimations. One reads, I wish, with the same sort of meditative pathos with which Wordsworth intimately regards the meanest flower, thereby binding flower, poet, and reader each to each in hermeneutical piety.

Finally, however, I want to make it clear that I advance no claim for the lyrical drama as a positive genre. Although the name does appear in the subtitle to Prometheus Unbound, lyrical drama does not identify a genre which we have always dimly known and that has been lying around somewhere waiting to be recognized by an ingenious critic. And if it were, it would probably not be noticed by a Romanticist, who, though as ingenious as most, has not historically exercised that capacity in either the invention or study of genres. The word itself comes strange to the pen. Among the instances of what might be called Romantic genre study exemplary is that of M. H. Abrams, which began with the structure and style of the greater Romantic lyric, applicable to most Romantic poetry, and ended (thus far, at least) in a mythus of the spirit of the age. In essential rapport with such a plot are most studies of the sublime, which initially posit a generic locus, only to find the critical wagon hitched to a fierce dynamic of dislocation and aggrandizement. The sublime is a "genre" which devours the very notion of kinds. It would probably suit neither the Romanticists I have brusquely categorized nor specialists in genre theory to have either natural supernaturalism or the sublime be denominated a genre. In fact, the Romantic period has always been a predicament for genre theorists and historians. Most influential has been the organization of the

Romantic lyric from a Victorian retrospect from which it can be assigned to the plastic class of dramatic lyric and accredited as a tendency toward the dramatic monologue (see Langbaum, pp. 38-75). That organization has recently been contested, however, according to definite principles of form which sharply distinguish the Romantic lyric from both the eighteenth-century dramatic lyric and the Victorian dramatic monologue, and which reinscribe for genre theory the brackets around the Romantic era. 16 Hybrid norm, the genre is an invention--not of mine but of a rhetoric of crossings. Each the act of the other's suffering, the suffering of the other's act, lyric and drama will always mix, never merge. In what I take to be a particularly Romantic sense of genre, lyrical drama designates a crossing or a threshold--a limen which marks out neither a progress nor a regress but a transgress: the transgression of child and man, action and suffering, lyric and drama. I would like to designate a genre whose one actively redundant rule (including this one) is that its every rule will be broken, its formal design breached, its purest pleasures the dissemblance of pain.

I shall conclude by nudging this designation one more step toward the promised conceptualization. In his superb essay "Positive Negation," Angus Fletcher describes personification as "the figurative emergent of the liminal scene." 17 Although Fletcher elaborates that phrase with subtle attention to the liminality of Coleridge's verse, there is little doubt that the uncanniness of personification that Fletcher's phrase captures would whet the appetite of Coleridge the critical censor. The critic quite properly regarded the dissembling characters of personification as vagrant, agnostic misfits which his theology could not tolerate and his dialectics neither capture nor kill. The uncanny emergence of personification, its liminal passage, transgresses "the sacred distinction between things and persons" which in the Biographia Literaria Coleridge affirms as the first tenet to which a true philosophical criticism must subscribe (Shawcross ed., I, 137). What goes for philosophical criticism applies to philosophical poetry as well; and in his criticism of the potentially great philosophical poet, Wordsworth, Coleridge prepares us to suppose that the same transgression that characterizes a particular figure also applies to a particular kind of Wordsworthian poem--a kind delimited in the Biographia primarily by Coleridge's ostensibly excessive objections to poems like "The Thorn" and the Immortality Ode, which otherwise have no conspicuous affinities. 18 That kind of poem, I would suggest, is lyrical drama: a mixed genre of transgression, which is the liminal scene where personifications, like fathers and sons, emerge--a scene affectively like Stonehenge, where the "circle of reddening stones" utter the groans of human sacrifice; like a graveyard alive with epitaphic inscriptions; like a plot of turf forming into characters of fatal legibility. But unlike all because the liminal scene of the lyrical drama diagrams no charmed circle, hides no daemonic spot. It represents a poetic genre which transgresses the orders of master and slave, priest and victim, nature and supernature, the quick and the dead, by provoking all dualisms with the variable flight of fugitive form.

#### NOTES

1. This essay is an extended version of a paper delivered at the 1980 meeting of the Wordsworth-Coleridge Association.

Lionel Trilling, "The Immortality Ode," The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society (1950), p. 152.

2. Trilling, p. 129. My interest in Trilling is that he gives me a line on the Ode. For a full scale assault on the principles of Trilling's criticism based on a full reading of the Ode, see Helen Vendler, "Lionel Trilling and the Immortality Ode," Salmagundi, 42 (Spring, 1978), 68-86.
3. See W. P. Albrecht, The Sublime Pleasures of Tragedy (1975), pp. 1-2, and James H. Averill, Wordsworth and the Poetry of Human Suffering (1980), p. 122, for summary accounts of eighteenth century tragic theory.
4. Preface to Lyrical Ballads (1802) in The Prose Works of William Wordsworth, ed. W. J. B. Owen and J. W. Smyser, 3 vols. (1974), I, 143.
5. Scots Magazine XVII (1756). Quoted in E. C. Mossner, The Life of David Hume (1970), pp. 359-60. For discussions of the tearfulness that tragedy was expected to provoke see James T. Lynch, Box, Pit, and Gallery: Stage and Society in Johnson's London (1953), pp. 283-85, Leo Hughes, The Drama's Patrons: A Study of the Eighteenth-Century London Audience (1971), pp. 112, 134-36.
6. In a letter, November 22, 1817, to Benjamin Bailey, The Letters of John Keats, 1814-1821, ed. Hyder E. Rollins, 2 vols. (1958), I, 186.
7. "Conversation with Klopstock," Prose Works, I, 95. The editors suggest the connection (n98).
8. For a version of this working through, see Averill's discussion narrative of "The Ruined Cottage" (Wordsworth and the Poetry of Human Suffering, p. 122).
9. All quotations from "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood" are from The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth, eds. Ernest de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire, 5 vols. (1947), Vol. 4.
10. On "thought" in the Ode, see Francis Ferguson, Wordsworth: Language as Counter-Spirit (1977), pp. 123-25. On the relation of tears and narrative in Wordsworth, see Neil Hertz, "Wordsworth and the Tears of Adam," in Wordsworth: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. M. H. Abrams (1972), pp. 107-22.
11. I take the gloss from Major British Poets of the Romantic Period, ed. William Heath (1973), p. 259, n2 (corrected).
12. For an analysis of the complications of Freud's theatricalism, especially as it is represented in the essay "Psychopathic Characters on the Stage," see Phillipe Lacoue-Labarthe, "Theatrum Analyticum," trans. Robert Vollrath and Samuel Weber, GLYPH 2 (1977), 122-43.
13. Charles Lamb, "On the Tragedies of Shakespeare, Considered with Reference to their Fitness for Stage Representation," The Works of Charles and Mary Lamb, ed. E. V. Lucas (1903; rpt., 1968), I, 102.
14. Robert Langbaum's use of the term in The Poetry of Experience (1957) is no exception. Langbaum neither attributes the term to Shelley nor discusses Prometheus Unbound. For Langbaum, lyrical drama is another ver-

sion of the dramatic lyric; both are subsumed within the category "poetry of experience." See pp. 57-65.

15. Shelley, Preface to Prometheus Unbound, Shelley's Poetry and Prose, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Sharon Powers (1977), p. 133.
16. See Ralph W. Rader, "The Dramatic Monologue and Related Lyric Forms," Critical Inquiry, Vol. 3, No. 1 (Autumn, 1976), 145-46.
17. Angus Fletcher, "'Positive Negation': Threshold, Sequence, and Personification in Coleridge," New Perspectives on Coleridge and Wordsworth, Selected Papers of the English Institute, ed. Geoffrey Hartman (1972), p. 158.
18. For a reading of "The Thorn" which endeavors to follow through on Coleridge's objections and analyzes the poem as a lyrical drama, see my "Wordsworth's Misery, Coleridge's Woe: Reading 'The Thorn,'" PLL, Vol. 16, No. 3 (Summer, 1980), 268-86.

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### The Immortality Ode: Lionel Trilling and Helen Vendler

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Of the then very New Criticism Lionel Trilling once wrote that it is "one of the most aggressive hard-working and portentous critical movements the history of literature has known. . . . No criticism has been so concerned to make distinctions and erect barriers, to separate thing from thing and to make salvation depend on the right choice" (E. M. Forster, 1943). His judgment applies with stunning precision to Professor Helen Vendler's recent energetic critique of Trilling's own classic essay, "The Immortality Ode" ("Lionel Trilling and the Immortality Ode," Salmagundi, 41 [Spring 1978], 66-86). Ironically Helen Vendler's new criticism, honoring complexity and ambiguity in poetic language, ends up--in contrast to Trilling's interpretation--by oversimplifying a poem that represents a poet's ongoing struggle with desire and imagination, instinct and religion, participation and perspective, childhood and adulthood.

The "right choice" in Professor Vendler's analysis of the Ode is the model of the elegy: "Every elegy descends to that point of death which is reached by Wordsworth in the weight of custom. The apotheosis or transfiguration which follows aims at the re-establishment of value. . ." (p. 78). "By 'solving' the answer of despair (deep-lying custom) with the answer of hope (deep-lying thoughts profounder than tears), Wordsworth intends to assert, as clearly as he can, that the feelings of despair are a waystation on the path to his ultimate powers of adulthood" (p. 80). In this sense the elegy that is the Ode, she says, wholly succeeds: in Helen Vendler's metaphor, Wordsworth, through an extraordinary number of brilliant semantic reversals and modifications, "cures" the "wounds to the spirit" announced throughout the poem.

But just because Wordsworth uses the "classic proportions" and language of elegy, it does not follow that the poem is an elegy (that no one has died is