1980

Point of View in the Narrative Poetry of Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Byron

Helen Herber  
*Loyola University Chicago*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://ecommons.luc.edu/luc_diss](https://ecommons.luc.edu/luc_diss)

*Part of the English Language and Literature Commons*

**Recommended Citation**
[https://ecommons.luc.edu/luc_diss/2107](https://ecommons.luc.edu/luc_diss/2107)

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses and Dissertations at Loyola eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Loyola eCommons. For more information, please contact ecommons@luc.edu.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License.  
Copyright © 1980 Helen Herber
POINT OF VIEW IN THE NARRATIVE POETRY OF
WORDS WORTH, CO LERIDGE, AND BYRON

by
Helen Herber

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School
of Loyola University of Chicago in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

December
1980
© Copyright by Helen Herber 1980

All Rights Reserved
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to express my gratitude to Loyola University Graduate School for giving me the opportunity to continue literary study; to the Schmitt Foundation for providing funds for a dissertation fellowship; to Dr. James Rocks, Director of Graduate Studies in English, for his assistance in the formal process of submitting the dissertation; to my family and friends for their humor and goodwill; and above all to my committee: to Dr. John Nabholtz, the chairman, whose scholarship in the Romantics inspired my own interest and has ensured accuracy and depth in my comprehension of the poetry; to Dr. Eileen Baldeshwiler, whose expertise in narrative theory helped to make my thinking and writing more intellectually sound; to Dr. Thomas Gorman, whose availability and encouragement kindled my confidence as I completed the dissertation. I have been privileged in working with a committee whose critical challenges were consistently delivered in a kind and comradely spirit of tutorship.
VITA

The author, Helen Herber, was born May 20, 1946, in Dublin, Ireland, to Cyril James and Mary Frances O'Meehan.

In 1963 she graduated from St. Louis' High School in Dublin and entered University College, Dublin, where she studied for the degree, conferred November, 1966, of Bachelor of Arts in English Language and Literature. She began graduate studies at Loyola University of Chicago in 1970 and was awarded the Master of Arts degree in English in February, 1974.

In 1971, she was granted a four-year teaching assistantship at Loyola University and has taught at college or university in a part-time capacity during the past five years.
**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ........................................ ii

VITA ............................................................ iii

Chapter

I. INTRODUCTION ............................................. 1

II. WORDSWORTH .............................................. 19
    The Salisbury Plain Poems ................................. 19
    The Story of Margaret ..................................... 32
    *Lyrical Ballads* and Related Poems ...................... 56

III. COLERIDGE .............................................. 102

IV. BYRON ...................................................... 141
    The Oriental Tales .......................................... 142
    *Mazeppa* and *Don Juan* ................................ 173

V. CONCLUSION .............................................. 187

BIBLIOGRAPHY ............................................. 193
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The subject of this study is the posture of the narrator—in the criticism of fiction expressed as point of view—in a selection of narrative works by three major Romantic poets. While the Romantic period in England produced a large and distinguished body of lyric poetry, it was also characterized by prolific narrative creation, and indeed many of the major Romantic texts are narrative works. Yet surprisingly little critical attention has been paid to these works in their essential character as narratives. Much has been written concerning the poems under consideration here, but the preponderance of this criticism addresses itself to matters of language and imagery, to theme and mythology, to historical and biographical commentary; the narrative procedures of the works have been frequently ignored or misconstrued, and critical bafflement and disagreement have been the result. But careful scrutiny of the essentially narrative elements in the works, the most central of which I take to be point of view, serves both to clarify the structural principles of individual poems and to reveal a hitherto unobserved continuity of formal intention among them, disparate as they are in style.
This study focuses on point of view in the works for two reasons, the first a matter of principle, the other a response to the demands of the literature itself. Point of view is the crucial technical choice which faces the narrative artist—it is his exclusive domain, and distinguishes him from the lyric and dramatic poet. As Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg assert:

The problem of point of view is narrative art's own problem, one that it does not share with lyric and dramatic literature. By definition narrative art requires a story and a story-teller. In the relationship between the teller and the audience, lies the essence of narrative art.¹

I conceive of point of view furthermore as comprehending the other narrative choices made by the artist: it is the structure through which, with the exception of metre and stanza form, all the other structures of the work are filtered. It provides the reader access to plot and character, shapes his attitudes and feelings toward them and varies the aesthetic distance. Point of view then is the chief technical means available to the writer of narrative for the control of the other narrative elements in his work.

While questions of point of view are relevant to all narrative works, they command our attention with particular intensity in some works. Such a high proportion of the central Romantic narrative texts employ some form

of manipulation of their point of view, by the use of eccentric or unreliable narrators, narrators whose relationships to their stories are fraught with ironies, and whose relationships with the reader characteristically go beyond the basic demands of getting the story told, that questions of point of view appear the most natural and compelling questions to ask. A great number of these poems are concerned, directly or indirectly, with matters of vision, with perspective, with the disparity that may exist between experience and recollections of experience, between the mind and the objects of its contemplation. In the ambivalence, unreliability, and multiform human fallibility that characterize many of these narrators, these concerns are dramatized. The ambiguous relationship of teller to tale becomes a metaphor for a central element in Romantic sensibility, that fluctuating uncertainty of the mind in confrontation with reality. In this sense, the techniques of these poems are their themes, the points of view they employ their subject matter.

This study purports to offer examples of how a significant segment of Romantic narrative poetry manipulates point of view and it is only among the major Romantics that we find such manipulation of point of view. The poems of minor figures of the age—of Scott, Southey and Landor, for instance—are largely innocent of technical refinement, depending for the most part on conventional Editorial— or
Neutral-Omniscient narration. The poems treated here represent not one tendency among many, but a preeminent tendency in Romantic narrative. Certain major Romantic narratives, however, are not treated here, most notably Wordsworth's *Prelude*. Recent criticism has established the predominance of lyric and dramatic as opposed to narrative elements in that work, and I have consequently regarded it as beyond the scope of my study. The works of Shelley and of Keats, both of whom are major figures, are also, perhaps conspicuously, absent, largely because Shelley wrote almost no narrative poetry, while the ambiguity of Keats's narratives, although it is related to the effects with which I am concerned here, originates in style rather than in manipulation of point of view.

The theoreticians whom I have found most useful and who have supplied me with most of the concepts to pursue this discussion are Norman Friedman and Wayne Booth. Although they approach the question of point of view from very different directions, and their works on the subject are radically different in aim and scope, the descriptions

---

2 These terms are discussed below, pp. 5-8.


they provide of the working of point of view are largely complementary. The chief virtue of Friedman's treatment of point of view is that it provides a plausible description of the kinds of narrators possible, of the position or angle of vision of each in relation to the story material, of the sources of information and the means of transmission available to each, and of the distance at which the narrator places the reader from the story. Points of view, which Friedman divides into eight kinds, are ranged along a scale of authorial visibility, from summary narrative, where the author's voice dominates, to immediate scene, where the focus is on a specific moment in the characters' lives and the author is unobtrusive or invisible: in other words, from telling to showing. Of these eight, only the first four have immediate application to the narratives under discussion here: Editorial Omniscience, Neutral Omniscience, "I"-as-Witness, and "I"-as-Protagonist. The latter four, Multiple Selective Omniscience, Selective Omniscience, The Dramatic Mode, and The Camera, are derived from fictional styles that predominate in the twentieth century, and

5These four constitute further stages in authorial invisibility. Multiple Selective Omniscience and Selective Omniscience represent events as passing through the minds of a series of characters, and the mind of one character, respectively. The Dramatic Mode is limited to recording only the observable scene and the behavior of characters, entering the mind of none. The Camera is a specious category. The effects of these modes are employed only briefly and incidentally by the Romantics, and not systematically as they are by the later writers who use them.
Although the terms Friedman uses are largely self-explanatory, each category has its own capabilities and characteristics. Editorial Omniscience, in which "the author's voice dominates the material, speaking frequently as 'I' or 'we'," does not limit the angle of vision of the narrator upon the story, nor the range of sources of information available to him, nor the kinds of comment or reflection he may make upon this information or upon any other topic. The freedom to comment creates the "characteristic mark" of this mode, "the presence of authorial intrusions and generalizations about life, manners and morals, which may or may not be explicitly related to the story at hand." Scene and summary are equally available to the Editorial-Omniscient narrator, so that distance, the immediacy with which the action appears to the reader, may be near or far.

The second mode, Neutral Omniscience, is the same in every respect, with the exception that direct authorial intrusion is omitted. Instead, "the author speaks impersonally in the third person." In both forms of omniscience, however, Friedman finds the author always ready to interpose himself between reader and story, so that his voice dominates the material.

The first-person modes, "I"-as-Witness and "I"-as-Protagonist, also have some common characteristics in that
the author in each has surrendered the right of direct intrusion. Both types of "I" narrators are characters within the frame of the action they narrate, although the angle of vision of the witness is different. The protagonist is fixed at the center of the action. The witness, as he is not centrally involved in the action, has greater mobility than the protagonist, who is confined to his own thoughts, feelings, and perceptions. Although the witness, as a character in the story, can have "no more than ordinary access" to the inner states of others without destroying realistic illusion, his peripheral position enables him to gather information from other characters, through such strategies as reading letters and other documents, and through interviews and conversations.  

Friedman concludes his essay with some general discussion of the uses to which these varieties of point of view have been put and the ends to which they appear most appropriate. He suggests, for example, that when the personality of the author-narrator has a definite function in relation to story, the Editorial-Omniscient mode provides the means to express that personality. Again, the "I"-as-Protagonist frame lends itself to "tracing the growth of a personality as it reacts to experience"—in this way it places a certain emphasis

6"Point of View in Fiction," pp. 1170-76.
7Ibid., pp. 1179-82.
upon the character of the teller, rather than upon the matter told. This same emphasis can be achieved in the "I"-as-Witness mode, although Friedman finds this category chiefly useful for creating suspense. In a number of the poems treated here, an "I"-as-Witness narrator gradually reveals his own character and developing vision as he confronts his story.

I have supplemented Friedman's general description of point of view with a number of concepts derived from Wayne Booth's more extensive treatment of the rhetoric of story-telling. His distinction between dramatized and undramatized narrators overlaps with certain of Friedman's categories. Obviously, both "I"-as-Witness and "I"-as-Protagonist narrators are dramatic structures. What is more useful for my purposes here is the notion of the Editorial-Omniscient narrator as a dramatic presence, although Friedman's account of this category seems to imply that omniscient narrators are by nature undramatic. There are no doubt a great number of narrators in the course of literature whose editorial commentary is flat, discursive, and expository. But Booth also points out some of the ways in which the Editorial-Omniscient narrator can become a rich dramatic presence, as vivid as any in the story he relates. In *Tom Jones*, for instance, Booth finds the intrusions of the dramatized "Fielding" constitute a "running account of growing intimacy between the
narrator and the reader, an account with a kind of plot of its own and a separate denouement. Among the poems which are the subject of this study, there exist a number told by Editorial-Omniscient narrators whose intrusions go beyond the strict demands of exposition and rhetoric, and constitute a dramatic relationship either with the story material, or with the reader, or with both.

Allied to the notion of dramatic narrators is the notion of unreliable narrators. Insofar as any narrator is realized as a character, he may reflect, among his other human qualities, some degree of fallibility or unreliability. According to Booth, "difficult irony is not enough to make a narrator unreliable. Nor is unreliability ordinarily a matter of lying... It is most often a matter of what James calls inconscience." The narrator is deluded or he believes himself to have qualities which the author and reader deny him. Among the narratives of Wordsworth and Coleridge in particular, we find many examples of unreliable narration, of narrators whose own prejudices and preconceptions and limited intelligence obstruct at least for a time their capacity to see clearly and to relate their tales without distortion.

In light of the dramatic possibilities inherent in Editorial "I"s, I concur with Booth's distinguishing

---

8 *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, p. 216.
9 Ibid., p. 159.
all narrators, however directly they may speak for the author's values, from the author in his own person. While the distinction is not always a useful one, in approaching Romantic narratives it appears to me indispensable. The concept of the author "in his own person" existing within the work is possibly misleading. Booth's view of the Editorial "I" as a dramatic entity, a persona, facilitates our scrutinizing such a narrator as a consciously conceived element in the work he narrates.

With regard to one concept that cuts across all categories of point of view, the distinction between scene, in which a specific time is rendered in detail, and summary, in which "long tracts of the world of the novel" are rapidly traversed to furnish the reader with necessary information, Phyllis Bentley provides a concise discussion. Bentley distinguishes between summary that is dull and discursive, and that which is an indispensable tool of the narrative artist. The latter distills essential information from long spans of time, sparing the reader rehearsal of inessential detail, and provides for variations in intensity by alternating with the dramatic vividness


11 With the exception of The Camera, which excludes summary. Even the Dramatic Mode permits a character to summarize.
The narrative procedures of certain of the works studied here have caused me to modify slightly Friedman's description of the working of point of view. Friedman observes that Editorial Omniscience is useful where the personality of the narrator has a distinct function to fulfill. But the "personality" of a Neutral-Omniscient narrator, his qualities of mind, which by definition are not dramatized through direct intrusions, may make themselves clearly felt in the tone of his commentary. Tone is a function of all points of view, indirectly conveying attitudes consonant with the character of a dramatized narrator, or adding dimension to that character beyond what is expressly dramatized. In Neutral Omniscience tone may permit the narrator's character to emerge, not as a dramatic entity, but as an informing spirit which leaves its mark on the whole.

Again, in practice the categories of Editorial Omniscience and "I"-as-Witness allow of some mingling. An Editorial-Omniscient narrator may be dramatized to the point that he takes on a life of his own and has the air of speaking from first-hand observation of the world of his story. On the other hand, a witness-narrator may be

---

"privileged to know what could not be learned by strictly natural means." Friedman's formulation of the distinguishing mark of the witness as being "within the frame of the action, more or less acquainted with its chief personages" does not altogether remove this ambiguity--one which proved fertile in Romantic narrative, where narrators often combine privileged access to information with direct knowledge of elements in their stories. Privilege and omniscience may be distinguished, moreover, if we take privilege to mean access only to factual information, while omniscience commonly means absolute reliability as to matters both of fact and moral value. In reality, a narrator may possess factual omniscience without moral omniscience. A narrator whose access to information is unlimited may exhibit limited capacity to grasp the significance of his information. This may, of course, be simply bad art--where the artist himself fails to grasp the implications of what he relates. But the more frequent case among the works studied here is the use of this hybrid "unreliable omniscience" to dramatize the development of insight in the mind of the narrator. Indeed, one of its effects is to undermine the convention of absolute reliability in matters of value, by dramatizing even factually omniscient narrators as gradually perceiving value in the course of the storytelling.

---

The poems which I have selected as demonstrating what I argue is a characteristically Romantic use of point of view, though they are varied in style and subject, do not constitute as arbitrary a grouping as may at first appear. Among other qualities, they exhibit a high concentration of "I"-as-Witness or "I"-as-Protagonist narrators to focus on the perceptions and character of the narrator as these affect and are affected by the process of storytelling. Since this focus upon the teller is a natural result of first-person narration, the narratives represented here are remarkable not for radical innovation in technique, but for consistency.

A similar emphasis on the perception of the teller is created in many of the poems by slightly different methods, chiefly by the use of multiple narrators or highly dramatized Editorial-Omniscient narrators. Friedman makes passing mention of a category of point of view that mixes witness and protagonist narration, where the protagonist tells his own story, not to the reader, but rather to someone else who relays it to the reader. Friedman's description fits in part those forms of multiple narration that are present in such works as Wordsworth's The Excursion, Book I, and Byron's The Giaour, for example, where the task of storytelling passes back and forth between two or more tellers. The resulting opportunities

14"Point of View in Fiction," p. 1175.
for cross-commentary are exploited, bringing the act of
telling into sharp dramatic focus.

In certain poems, an Editorial-Omniscient narrator
lays claim to our attention by emerging from his story-
telling as a dramatic presence, an effect often accomplished
by the use of some elements of the "I"-as-Witness frame.
Or such emergence may result simply from intrusions of the
kind that constitute a developing relationship with the
story or reader or both.\textsuperscript{15} The result is to create a
dramatic context outside the frame of the action narrated
which may become as important as that action, as it does
in a great number of the works considered here. I am
thinking for example of Wordsworth's "The Idiot Boy,"
where the narrator explicitly addresses the reader and
struggles with his story-telling task, or of "Peter Bell,"
where the narrator—although his point of view on the story
is omniscient—is established as a character telling a tale,
to a specified audience at a specified time and place.
The act of telling is dramatized in a different way by the
narrator of Coleridge's "Christabel," whose commentary
reveals his intense and shifting involvement with the tale.
In Byron's \textit{Don Juan} the persona's battle with life and
art, dramatized in the process of telling Juan's story,
is of equal importance to the matter told. Technique—to

\textsuperscript{15}A relationship explored by Booth in his chapter
"Telling as Showing" (\textit{The Rhetoric of Fiction}, pp. 211 ff.).
which rhetorical considerations are related as part to whole--has been shown by Mark Schorer as a means of discovering, objectifying, and evaluating the subject matter of a work of art. In this view of technique as an intrinsic aspect of formal coherence, point of view is seen "not only as a mode of dramatic delimitation, but more particularly, of thematic definition."\(^{16}\) The character and drama of the speaker, then, become part of the total significance of the work.

In their concentrated exploration of the mind of the teller and its shifting relationship to the matter told, these poems embody an important development in narrative representation and reflect changes from the world view that characterized the late Augustan and the early Romantic periods.\(^{17}\) But the fundamental techniques of point of view which they employ are not the original or exclusive inventions of the Romantic poets. At least as early as Chaucer, dramatized storytellers lent their peculiar flavor to the events they related. The tendencies of Romantic narrative presented here may be seen, then, not as a radical departure from the narrative tradition as a whole, but rather as a development within it. Indeed,


they reflect a large pattern in the evolution of narrative generally, a pattern which Erich Kahler describes as an internalizing movement, in which the interaction of consciousness and reality throughout human history produce an art that is increasingly focused on man's inner reality. More specifically, Romantic narrative inherited, among other literary legacies, elements of the novel as it developed in the eighteenth century, when, according to Kahler,

the liberation of sentiment . . . and the insights resulting from that liberation, altered the forms of expression. These altered forms of expression further loosened the constraints upon sentiment and self-reflection. Forms as well as themes overstepped the bounds of convention. The ego engaged in monologue and dialogue became the vehicle of the new narrative. That is to say, first-person narrative and epistolary narrative became the new techniques for exploring and revealing the psyche.

The forbears of Romantic narrative are the ballad, the medieval tale, the folk tale, and so forth, but they are also the great works of prose fiction of the eighteenth century, most significantly those of Fielding and Sterne. In those unreliable Romantic narrators who confound their private imaginings with the (fictional) facts of their stories, who unconsciously reveal the workings of their minds even to the extent that at times they annihilate

---

19 Ibid., p. 143.
story, do we not hear the echo of Sterne's Tristram as he struggles with the unyeilding density of his experience? Can those intimate voices which drop the mask of omniscience to confide in the reader not owe something of their dramatized humanity to the narrator of Tom Jones? The narratives discussed here are told by a range of tellers from master raconteurs to bumbling fools. But they have in common that the speaker is unabashedly present, not as a naive authorial presence, but as a dramatic and fictive creation whose relationship with his tale is as much the concern of the work as is the tale in itself.

Although such conscious scrutiny of the storyteller's perspective may be the legacy of the preceding age, it corresponds with central Romantic aesthetic concerns. M. H. Abrams has pointed out that with the entry of expressive theories of art into English criticism, a development roughly cotemporaneous with the emergence of Romanticism, "The work of art ceases . . . to be regarded as primarily a reflection of nature, actual or improved; the mirror held up to nature becomes transparent and yields the reader insights into the mind and heart of the poet himself." 20 What is of interest to the reader of Romantic narratives is precisely that emphasis, not upon the objective world of nature but upon the mind's engagement

with that world. Point of view is exploited by these writers so that the emphasis falls in almost every instance in their narratives on story as a function of the narrator's powers of perception, and not on story as an end in itself.

In focusing upon the relationships between tellers and their tales, the major Romantic narratives dramatize the problems of storytelling, the inadequacy of language, the disparity between experience and expression, and the treacherous and relative nature of perception. Yet by their very existence, the poems also affirm the value of storytelling, of language and discourse and memory, of the power of the imagination to construct and reconstruct worlds, and the value of humans' articulating the adventures of the spirit as an antidote to isolation and the passage of time.
CHAPTER II

WORDSWORTH

Wordsworth's development as a narrative artist may provide an extended example of Schorer's principle that technique is everything. At the beginning and end of his career are two long, ambitious works, each of which is marred in its own way by inadequacies of technique. Enclosed between these two, however, is a body of poetic narrative that owes a large part of its distinctive character to the management of point of view, a management at times evidently careful, controlled and fully conscious, at other times seemingly accidental, inartistic even, or again serendipitous, but conducing, whatever its intentionality, to a kind of narrative that places peculiar and new emphasis on the mind of the narrator. The central theme of Wordsworth's poetry might be expressed as an exploration of the process of consciousness. In his major narratives the management of point of view facilitates and itself embodies this concern with the human mind.

I. The Salisbury Plain Poems

While "Salisbury Plain" is less than Wordsworth's best narrative, it indicates some of the directions that
his later art would take, evident in the changes he made in the course of revising this early poem. In its very imperfections it casts into relief the achievement of the later narratives in which Wordsworth had wrought and fully mastered those narrative forms that realized his vision, and had found the medium suited to his genius. But in "Salisbury Plain," and to some extent also in the revisions of that poem, Wordsworth fails to discover and make manifest his true subject; and his selected point of view, Neutral Omniscience, affords him little assistance.

Precisely as a mode of thematic definition (the chief function of technique in Schorer's view), the less restricted points of view--Editorial and Neutral Omniscience--are least useful. Friedman points out that Editorial Omniscience is the most difficult point of view to control because it is completely unlimited. Neutral Omniscience furnishes hardly more guidance, and indeed even deprives the writer of any distinctive character, whereas Editorial Omniscience demands that the dramatized "I" exhibit a

---

1 "Salisbury Plain" was alternatively titled "A Night on Salisbury Plain." In subsequent revision, the poem was called "Adventures on Salisbury Plain," and "Guilt and Sorrow"; under this latter title it was ultimately published. All three versions have been recently edited by Stephen Gill who provides a detailed account of their MS history. See The Salisbury Plain Poems of William Wordsworth, The Cornell Wordsworth, I (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975).

2 "Point of View in Fiction," p. 1171.
degree of internal consistency. Yet no inherent reason exists why Neutral Omniscience might not have produced a powerful and unified work, had Wordsworth been sure of his ground. But in "Salisbury Plain" he never seems quite to have made up his mind whether he is writing a social tract whose end is primarily didactic, or a narrative of individual distress whose end is primarily mimetic. He abuses the liberty afforded by Neutral Omniscience, his commentary at times distorting or obstructing the implications created by the story itself in its dramatic portions.

In his opening passage of commentary, for example, Wordsworth compares the suffering of a hypothetical savage, bred to a life of misery, with the more severe lot of civilized persons who find themselves cast by chance out of the sphere of refined life. The characters of the poem suffer great misfortunes which cut them off from former joys, but the author's detached comparisons are not calculated to arouse our interest in or sympathy with the plight of any individuals. There is something coldhearted, too aesthetically symmetrical, in the notion that those who have known better times suffer more severely from poverty and dispossession than do those born poor.

After the story of the traveler on the plain and his meeting with the Female Vagrant, the narrator comments again in general terms, on the political strife and oppression within and between nations that have reduced human
beings in great number to lives of intolerable hardship and misery. He argues explicitly that the barbarism of ancient days, reflected in what he believed to be the horrifying practices of Stonehenge, has been replaced by a social order no less barbaric. The story told by the Female Vagrant which makes up the body of the poem provides a clear example of social injustice in that the Vagrant's sufferings have identifiable social causes—the tyranny of the rich, poverty and war. But the dramatized action of the poem, encompassing the traveler's solitary journey, his meeting with the Female Vagrant and the interaction that ensues between the characters, creates a very different set of implications than the didactic framework at beginning and end accounts for.

Particularly where the narrator's voice recedes and the story is presented dramatically we find the characters and their actions taking on significances other than, or beyond those identified by the omniscient author. Where the traveler is presented crossing Salisbury Plain at sunset, close, detailed scenic narration is used to create fully and convincingly the experience as it appeared to the traveler. Details are selected by the author to project the character's consciousness. Impressions come to us filtered through the traveler's perception: "The distant spire / That fixed at every turn his backward eye / Was lost". Images of land devoid of human habitation,
"wastes of corn that stretched without a bound, / But where
the sower dwelt was nowhere to be found", of an indifferent
nature, characterised by the blank sky and homeward-bound
crows, and the plain which grows "more wild and more for-
lorn / And vacant" as the traveler leaves the town behind,
convey at once the isolation of the particular character
and an implied vision of man displaced in the natural world,
a vision that transcends the didacticism of the frame.

Again, where the Female Vagrant describes her ex-
periences on shipboard, her suffering exemplifies what is
tragic and unalterable in human life more than it argues
or illustrates any form of social malaise. She describes
an alienation from all the sources of human joy and comfort
so radical that it amounts to a kind of life-in-death:

"For me, farthest from earthly port to roam
Was best, my only wish to shun where man might come.

"And oft, robbed of my perfect mind, I thought
At last my feet a resting place had found.
'Here will I weep in peace,' so Fancy wrought,
'Roaming the illimitable waters round,
Here gaze, of every friend but Death disowned,
All day, my ready tomb the ocean flood.'"

Though the woman's hardships have extensive social causes,
and her very exile is the result of war, what is striking in
the passage quoted, which forms the climax of her sufferings,
is the state of feeling of the sufferer rather than the
social background which produced those sufferings.

Apart from these isolated scenes, the interaction
of the characters throughout suggests a conception of
human life not based on the social and political values explicitly emphasized by the narrator. Initially when the characters meet, each is frightened and suspicious, absorbed in a private world of grief and terror; in the course of the night, however, as the woman tells her story and the man comforts her, they establish a kind of community in suffering in which their individual burdens are lightened. At the same time, nature begins to show a different aspect once the human energies have been set in motion:

While thus they talk the churlish storms relent;
And round those broken walls the dying wind
In feeble murmurs told his rage was spent.

(11. 199-201)

When the woman breaks off in her story, overcome with grief, her companion

looked and saw the smiling morn
All unconcerned with their unrest resume
Her progress through the brightening eastern gloom.

(11. 327-99)

He leads her to the door of their shelter to show her the beauty of the dawning world, "after weary night / So ruinous far other scene to view." She is consoled at the sight enough to resume her story as they go on their way again. The consolations made available to these characters, then, are the bond of sympathy through which the burden of grief is lightened by communication with a fellow-sufferer, and the beauty of the natural world, which, though "unconcerned", is still the inalienable heritage of all mankind. These,
and not the large political and social claims made by the narrator at beginning and end, are the values dramatized in the work.

Not only in the didactic frame, but also in the course of the story, the narrator's commentary abridges the effect and distorts the implications of his story. At times he sacrifices verisimilitude to introduce melodramatic effects and to heighten artificially the emotional pitch of the events. As the traveler continues across the plain, for example, the careful and convincing rendering of his experience is interrupted to present pantomime hobgoblins, introduced as a sinister reminder of the brutality of human history which is suggested by the legends of human sacrifice surrounding Stonehenge. The narrative is no longer concerned with the fate of one man, but seems determined to evoke the horrors of all. For the faithful rendering of experience, the art at which Wordsworth excels, we find instead a strained and unconvincing attempt to dramatize a frightful vision of history through violent and infernal imagery.

Melodrama usurps psychological realism again where the narrator describes the mental state of the woman for the sole purpose of introducing the grisly anecdote of the corpse under the floor (stanzas xvi-xviii). The woman has ready and plausible reason to feel afraid of a strange man, alone as she is in a ruined dwelling; the charnel-house
imagery, then, strikes an excessive note. In general, the Gothic and melodramatic elements in the work produce just such a result of interfering with realistic effects. But in the stanzas that follow, as the woman's discourse is reported by the narrator, something technically interesting occurs, though the theme of her speech continues to be horrific stories she has heard. The narrator summarizes what the woman tells, but she in turn is summarizing what she has heard from an old man, whose information comes from yet another source:

Much of the wonders of that boundless heath
He spoke, and of a swain who far astray
Reached unawares a height and saw beneath
Gigantic beings ranged in dead array

(ll. 172-5).

The elaborate distancing of these stories within stories permits the shocking legend to be alluded to again without shattering verisimilitude and permits hearsay events to be presented in vivid scenic detail. Further, the horrors are dramatically effective as long as belief in supernatural beings is clearly attributed to the characters. But the point of view is not sustained and the narrator intrudes, generalizing on the practices of the druids and describing them in the present tense, as if he, rather than his characters, were the witness of these things:

Such beings thwarting oft the traveller's way
With shield and stone-ax atride across the wold

(ll. 176-77).

The reader is hard-pressed to decide what kind of belief
to accord these elements of the supernatural. Indeed, the claim made here is in direct conflict with the assertion at the conclusion that the horrors of Stonehenge are a matter of past history (stanza xlvii).

Though the problems in the work are in no sense the result only of the point of view, Neutral Omniscience affords Wordsworth a fatal freedom to moralize, and to moralize reductively, so that the characters' stories come to be mere examples of the narrator's social philosophy, rather than dramatic entities. In this split between image and idea, between the dramatized experience of the characters and the ideological framework imposed by the author, the freedom of the omniscient point of view, far from discovering subject, permits Wordsworth to obscure it.

When he set about revising "Salisbury Plain," Wordsworth made significant adjustments in the way he used Neutral Omniscience, placing more consistent emphasis on the elements of psychological realism and less on the didactic implications of the work. The revised version, "Adventures on Salisbury Plain," limits the amount of reliable commentary and replaces the didactic framework with an increased number of incidents, both at beginning and end. "Adventures" plunges directly into an incident in which "A Traveller on the skirt of Sarum's Plain / O'er-took an aged man with feet half bare," dramatically establishing the inhospitable world of the poem and
creating the humane character of the traveler who takes responsibility for a fellow being. By starting the poem with an incident, Wordsworth involves the reader immediately in an interchange between two characters and the world around them, dramatizing from the start the community of the poor, where "Salisbury Plain" indulged in reflection on a grand scale that engaged the reader's attention only intellectually. Though the incident was cut out again when Wordsworth came to revise the work for publication in 1841, it signals a different approach to narrative than that which characterizes "Salisbury Plain." Wordsworth confines himself to telling a story; the events of the story itself are expanded in an attempt to embody dramatically the vision that is explicated by the didactic frame of "Salisbury Plain."

The traveler is individualized in "Adventures" by the insertion of seven stanzas not in "Salisbury Plain," which supply among other things a plausible motive for the terror he experiences, where the earlier version depended on the hocus-pocus voices coming from Stonehenge to elaborate on his emotional state. Here Wordsworth makes effective and economical use of the opportunity Neutral Omniscience affords to summarize information. We are informed that after an unspecified number of years in maritime service, into which he was press-ganged, the traveler was freed to return to his family, but without any wages. In
desperation, he robbed and killed a strange man, almost on his own doorstep, and has since been a fugitive from the law. This story, of a good man driven by injustice to a life of crime and vagrancy, conveys an indictment of society that no amount of direct moralizing on Wordsworth's part could render so convincing.

Though most of the didactic commentary is cut out of "Adventures," Wordsworth does allude to the legend of Stonehenge in a single stanza of gloomy reflection on "the giant Wicker... / Its dismal chambers hung with living men" (ll. 158-59). But the allusion is now subordinated to the thematic concerns of the story and the suffering of the character at hand. What the woman has heard of the legends, and passes on to the sailor, is taken over largely intact from "Salisbury Plain" (stanzas xvii-xxii; in "Adventures," xxiv-xxviii). Two irrelevant intrusions, one concerning druidic practices, the other lamenting the loss of youth and joy, are cut. "Guilt and Sorrow" alters these passages further. The legends connected with Stonehenge are omitted. The only tale of horror that persists is that of the corpse found under the floor of the ruined house where the travelers take shelter. Though the alterations generally tend toward a narrative style that expresses value indirectly and through implication, rather than resorting to overstatement and sensationalism, this instance and that of the corpse swinging on the gibbet strike a luridly Gothic note, out
of tune with the atmosphere of ordinary life and the emotional realism that generally prevail and are the strongest qualities in the work.

In "Adventures on Salisbury Plain," the ending of the poem is greatly extended. The author's homily in "Salisbury Plain" is replaced by a number of loosely plotted incidents that resolve the fate of the sailor and further dramatize the inhuman effects of poverty. In the first of these, the two travelers meet a family in which the child has been severely beaten by his father. Jonathan Wordsworth isolates this as the only moment in "Adventures" which achieves the "closely observed, quite unliterary emotion which is the greatness of the later poetry," but observes that the incident "has no importance to Wordsworth in its own right." It is used instead as an instance of the breakdown of human relationships, the microcosm of family life reflecting the arbitrary cruelty and the violation of natural bonds that mark the life of society. Indeed the very lines that Jonathan Wordsworth singles out:

At breakfast they were set, the child their joy and mirth.

Her husband for that pitcher rose; his place
The infant took (as true as heaven the tale)
And when desired to move, with smiling face
For a short while did in obedience fail.
He was not five years old, and him to trail
And bruise as if each blow had been his last . . .

(ll. 621-27),

for their fidelity to human reality are compressed and
summarized in "Guilt and Sorrow" so that their concrete, immediate impact is dulled. The incident becomes an occasion for the traveler to endure renewed pangs of guilt and to sermonize on the wickedness of the world.

Overall, however, by reducing the general commentary, the revisions tend toward defining relations between the characters and their world more through implication and dramatization than through direct moralizing and explanation. Yet the work remains marred by a great structural weakness that Wordsworth himself recognized in a note dictated to Isabella Fenwick, where he observes that "the incidents of this attempt do only in a small degree produce each other, and it deviates accordingly from the general rule by which narrative pieces ought to be governed." In short, the poem lacks unity in its plotting, a shortcoming not alleviated by the use of Neutral Omniscience with its absence of limitations, of a defined perspective, or any characteristic angle of vision. Its lack of unity alone would set this early poem apart from the later narratives, which, as we shall see, typically evolve with self-contained inevitability as the operation of a well-defined consciousness around a single event.


Yet in its modest and imperfect way, the structure shared by the Salisbury Plain poems, the story-within-a-story, the "I"-as-Witness point of view within the larger Neutral Omniscient framework, contains in embryo the narrative method of the great work which follows it, The Excursion, Book I, where the double contexts operate to transform and reevaluate each other in a unified synthetic whole.

II. The Story of Margaret

The poem initially called "The Ruined Cottage" was composed in the spring of 1797, and greatly extended in the early months of 1798 to the point that it became a very different work. After further revision, this work was finally published as the first book of The Excursion in 1814. Though flashes of genius occasionally illuminate the Salisbury Plain poems, there is nothing in them to presage the sustained power which characterizes the telling of the history of Margaret. Jonathan Wordsworth marshalls some impressive evidence of the increasing depth of the emotional concerns of Wordsworth's other poetry at this period, but is forced to conclude that "The most one can say is that Wordsworth is feeling his way toward the great poetry of The Ruined Cottage."5 The work itself exhibits a great technical distance from the Salisbury Plain poems,

5The Music of Humanity, p. 60.
being told by two witness-narrators: the first is a young poet whose narration introduces, punctuates and frames the narration of the other, an elderly pedlar, who provides an "I"-as-Witness account of the decline and death of Margaret, the owner of the ruined cottage where the two have met. Wordsworth uses the "I"-as-Witness point of view to accomplish one of those purposes for which it is most suited, to shift the focus of interest from the events narrated to the narrating ego. Geoffrey Hartman notes the effect of this shift—ordinary enough in itself, but put to very specific use by Wordsworth:

Instead of centering transparently on Margaret, the tale reflects also the narrator, and tends to become a story about the relation of the teller to tale. This reflexive . . . emphasis is achieved by the introduction of the poet as a third person, which allows the accent to fall on the way the Pedlar confronts Margaret's passion.6

The events of Margaret's story are enclosed within the perceptions of the two narrators, and form the substance of the transaction between these two. Ultimately, the poem is concerned with the evolving responses of poet and pedlar to one another and to the events, and not with the events in themselves.

Though we must look to the work itself in order to argue such a view, the history of its composition provides tentative evidence of Wordsworth's deliberate intention to

6 Wordsworth's Poetry, p. 139.
construct a story in which the inner life takes precedence over external event. The first phase of composition, so far as the editors of Wordsworth have been able to reconstruct it, transformed the germinal fragments, "Incipient Madness" into "a short bare narrative of unrelieved distress." Though no manuscript of the poem at this stage survives, it appears to have consisted at the least of those lines present in MS. A, and the original conclusion. The first of these passages (corresponding closely to lines 502-570 and 582-91 of The Excursion, Book I) describes briefly the simple, happy life led by Margaret and her husband, and relates the gradual deracination of Robert, the husband, through illness and subsequent idleness and poverty. The original conclusion (which corresponds to lines 871-916 in The Excursion, Book I) brings the poem back, by way of Margaret's last dreadful years, to the fact of her death and to the cottage where "in sickness she remained; and where she died; / Last human tenent of these ruined walls." Margaret's story in the spring of 1797 was a stark chronicle of waste, the finality of her death allayed little or not at all. Hartman has observed


8Details of MS. A may be found in PW, V, 377.
of "The Ruined Cottage" that in the cottage itself is "something too central: fixed and scarcely human. The story then evolves as a humanizing glance."  

Between June, 1797, and March, 1798, Wordsworth expanded his narrative to more than three times its original length. But the real work of humanizing begins with the massive revision of early 1798, where Wordsworth expanded and developed the character and function of the pedlar, and constructed the dramatic framework of interaction between the pedlar and the poet—a framework implicitly contained in the earliest passages that survive, but given full development in this phase of revision.

The additions to the poem appear to have been made in the following order: the pedlar's series of visits to Margaret, after Robert's desertion, were expanded at some unestablished date between June, 1797, and February, 1798. This completes the story of Margaret and forms the bulk of the second part. At this point Wordsworth turned to developing the dramatic framework, and composed the passages that link the first part of the poem to the second and that interrupt the story at the point where grief first enters the poem.  


10The most comprehensive account of the process of composition is provided by John Alban Finch in his essay "The Ruined Cottage Restored: Three Phases of Composition, 1795-1798," JEGP, LXVI (1967), 179-99. I have depended throughout my discussion on this treatment of the genesis of the poem.
Margaret's world. Next he composed the opening, which consisted at first of the poet's toiling across the plain, his meeting with the old man, to whose character and occupation the poet devotes some sixty-odd lines; then the little incident, already drafted in the "Christabel" notebook, of the broken drinking bowl at the well leads the pedlar into his recollection of Margaret and brings the composition to the point where MS. A begins. The latter two additions, the passages that break the story and the initial meeting between the two narrators, have to do entirely with the way in which the tale is to be told. They alter the story of Margaret by placing it in the larger context of the transactions between the two witness-narrators, where it is seen from the poet's perspective as an event of significance in the pedlar's life, while the telling of it becomes an event of significance in his own life. In other words, as each of these witnesses performs his task of relating, the effect of what he relates on his own character and that character in itself tend to become as important as what he relates.  

One of the poet's tasks is to narrate the early history and background of the pedlar. This was the next part of the poem to be composed in the spring of 1798.

---

MS. B contains a number of draft endings for the poem, one of which Wordsworth finally settled upon as an appropriate resolution, though in March, 1798, he seems to have been uncertain how to close the work. The manuscript then contains the substance of the whole poem as it appeared in The Excursion of 1814.

The relation of the poet-narrator to the action that he relates is a complex one. He tells of a meeting on a single day in summer with an old friend, the pedlar, whose life history he summarizes at some length. The pedlar then assumes the burden of narrating the story of Margaret, the former occupant of the cottage where they have met. This story is framed and punctuated by the dramatic context, narrated by the poet. At two levels in the work, the poet functions as a witness-narrator, one of those personages that Friedman describes as "a character in his own right within the story itself, more or less involved in the action." The poet is the medium through which the pedlar's experience is reflected; he tells us the pedlar's history, and witnesses the pedlar's act of telling Margaret's story. And the poet bears witness to that simple and tragic story, as it is recreated for him by the pedlar.

The opening landscape adumbrates the shifting perspec-

---

12 "Point of View in Fiction," p. 1174.
tive of the structure as a whole. The poet's experience of the scene through which he is traveling, oppressed by heat and flies, and his awareness of an alternative vantage point, that of someone who, from a shaded cave

With sidelong eye looks out upon the scene
By power of that impending covert thrown
To finer distance. . . .

(11. 15-17)
suggests, in the contrast, that states of consciousness alter profoundly the reality that we perceive. So too the layering of time and consciousness about the stark story of Margaret's destruction creates by the end a very different perspective than that which obtains at the beginning.

The poet's experience forms the first center of interest and, though he shifts his focus almost immediately to the pedlar, his own perception of things remains more or less central. He describes (through a dual focus) a chance meeting with the pedlar on the previous evening: we see the pedlar in statuesque repose, the figure framed by the perceiving mind of the poet:

Him had I marked the day before--alone
And stationed in the public way, with face
Turned toward the sun then setting

(11. 38-40)
The poet places before us not only the figure of the pedlar, but his own response to the sight: he is "stricken" by it. His mode of narration characteristically balances between the object perceived and his own impressions.
Where he relates the early history of the pedlar, however, this dual focus is abandoned after the first two paragraphs which introduce the history. In the first of these, the narrator places primary emphasis on the value of the pedlar in his own life,

As I grew up, it was my best delight
To be his chosen comrade.

Still deeper welcome found his pure discourse:
How precious when in riper days I learned
To weigh with care his words, and to rejoice
In the plain presence of his dignity!

(ll. 60-76)

Again, the dual focus obtains, the formative influence of the pedlar on the young poet, and the inherent interest of the pedlar's own unique character forming equally the subject matter.

The history itself, however, is told "objectively," with almost no reference by the poet-narrator to himself. Jonathan Wordsworth feels that the section does not belong in "The Ruined Cottage," having, as he puts it, "almost no bearing" on the rest of the work. Because the lines on the pedlar "were written at a different time from the bulk of the 'Story of Margaret', and under a very different impulse," he feels they should be considered a separate work.13 I would argue, on the contrary, that they have profound bearing on the work as a whole. They deepen and strengthen the authority of the pedlar. They constitute

another story-within-a-story, and by this structural
parallel, invite comparison with the history of Margaret.
The myth they embody—love of nature leading to the love
of man—constitutes an implicit scale on which the tragedy
of Margaret is registered. The poet claims for his old
friend a lofty sensibility, "highest gifts, / The vision
and the faculty divine," that he is one of those "Poets
that are sown / By Nature" (11. 77-79). The summary
relation of the pedlar's past in part makes good that
claim, affording the word "Poet" a special significance,
and affording nature, which is omnipresent in the work, a
special place in the development of human sensibility.
The lines include, as Hartman has remarked, Wordsworth's
"first portrait of the growth of a mind,"\(^{14}\) a landmark in
his development as a poet, because it expresses for the
first time the centrality of external nature to human
existence and growth that is the core of the Wordsworth
myth of nature. This central relationship of man to
nature, finally, provides the philosophic basis through
which the resolution of the work is achieved.

I concede that the pedlar's history is not drama-
tic in the sense that his telling of the story of Margaret
is dramatic. It is outside the chronological framework
of the dramatic action, a flashback from the main line of

\(^{14}\) Wordsworth's Poetry, p. 135.
narrative, and characterized throughout by summary, a technique that can tend toward excessive generalization and flatness. Summary is the natural choice, however, since the matter to be related occurred over an extended period of time. And indeed, Wordsworth handles it admirably, communicating both the habitual quality of the pedlar's experience and creating the illusion at times of immediacy, particularly at crucial moments in the pedlar's life. In such a passage as that where the pedlar as a child

   many an evening, to his distant home
   In solitude returning, saw the hills
   Grow larger in the darkness; all alone
   Beheld the stars come out above his head,
   And travelled through the wood, with no one near
   To whom he might confess the things he saw

   (ll. 126-31),

the habitual quality of the experience is carried not by the verb tenses, but by the single phrase "many an evening"; otherwise the passage might be describing an isolated, specific scene, and it achieves moreover the illusion of being transmitted through the mind of the child who is its subject, the concrete, simple diction conspiring to persuade us that these might be the unmediated perceptions of that child.

   Though I do not propose any very extended treatment of the Wordsworth myth of nature, it will be helpful to sum up the outlines of the pedlar's early life, as the peculiar nature of his experience is intrinsically connected with his character as a man and a teller of stories.
His childhood is described in terms of his relationship with nature, a relationship essentially solitary, exclusive of human influence, in which the child is a passive recipient and his mind is impressed with "the presence and the power / Of greatness" in the external world. At length he internalizes these elements of the natural world so that they become the structures of his mind against which later experience is measured:

With these impressions would he still compare
All his remembrances, thoughts, shapes and forms . . . .

(11. 141-2)

The dominant emotion at this stage is fear of the awful things that the boy perceives; but it is a fear that impels him to seek out the places in nature, "caves forlorn" and "the hollow depths of naked crags," where that power is most manifest.

As the boy matures, however, the face which nature shows him alters. The raw and terrifying show of power becomes a "lesson deep of love"; his response is an utter surrender of self, a union and identification of his soul with the glory of the natural world in a perfect equilibrium. But the very forces which make this possible, the power of imagination, answering to the infinite in nature, threaten to consume him:

his spirit drank
The spectacle: sensation, soul, and form,
All melted into him; they swallowed up
His animal being; in them did he live,
And by them did he live; and they were his life.

(11. 206-10)
The equilibrium between imagination and nature cannot be sustained. Like Margaret, whose words are later quoted: "What I seek I cannot find," the pedlar is reaching beyond the possibilities of human existence. His relationship to nature now becomes turbulent because he would have nature answer to the conflict of his inner life: "Full often wished he that the winds might rage / When they were silent" (ll. 287-88). And in a sense he tries to violate nature, forcing her to match the mechanistic structures of human science: "he scanned the laws of light / Amid the roar of torrents," in a vain attempt to control and comprehend the forces overpowering him.

Nature's final gift is to rescue him from his unease. The imagination, having moved beyond nature, can find no home there. The pedlar is driven by "That stern yet kindly Spirit"--and it is clear that this spirit, "attached to regions mountainous," resides in nature and not in the mind--to look to human life as an outlet for his energies. Thus is he led to his avocation. And he finds in human beings, in the sphere of adult life that he now inhabits, the correlative of those lofty imaginings engendered by nature:

From his native hills
He wandered far; much did he see of men,
Their manners, their enjoyments and pursuits,
Their passions and their feelings; chiefly those
Essential and eternal in the heart.

(ll. 340-44)
His connections with human life, and his own way of life, fit him peculiarly for a comprehensive and disinterested love of humanity. Though he has broad experience of human life, it is the experience of an observer, for he remains a solitary lover of nature. Thus, "He could afford to suffer / With those whom he saw suffer" (ll. 370–71); his view of life, from the haven of his own secure and joyful solitude, is essentially the long view. In this way he is peculiarly fitted also to the task of recreating Margaret's tragedy, and to creating around it the perspective that makes it expressive of an infinite harmony at the end. Through this long account of the pedlar's history and character, Wordsworth is telling us how the story of Margaret is to be read, as much an event in the life of the pedlar himself as a story in its own right.

In the larger context of the whole work, the story of Margaret functions as a link in the relationship between the pedlar and the young poet. In the exchanges between the two characters, pedlar and poet, the habitual mode of functioning of the pedlar's mind and its effect on the younger poet are dramatized. From the outset, their responses to the scene about them are very different. To the poet, the spot is desolate, the garden an anonymous wasteland where "gooseberry trees . . . shot in long lank slips" (ll. 453–56). The images he employs are chiefly literal images of deterioration: plants "matted," "lank,"
"leafless," "scanty." The single metaphor invokes funereal garb: "in a cold damp nook, I espied a well / Shrouded with willow-flowers" (ll. 461-62). His account of the garden opens with a prosaic, expository statement: "It was a plot / Of garden ground run wild" (ll. 453-54). The poet sees the palpable fact. For the pedlar, however, the scene is steeped in memory and association. "'I see around me here / Things which you cannot see'" (ll. 469-70), he tells his companion. What he sees at this point, however, speaks to him only of decay and death, Margaret's "peculiar nook of earth" yielding all trace of its former inhabitant to encroaching nature. Though the whole scene is a reminder of Margaret's presence, the pedlar in his grief insists that there is "no memorial left," that Margaret is "forgotten in the quiet grave." There is a little irony in this; for he can draw testimony of her existence from the very place which speaks to him of decay and death, and in the act of mourning he recalls her as she was in life.

During his account of Margaret, we remain conscious of the pedlar himself, in part because the point of view affords Wordsworth the latitude to interrupt the line of strict narrative progression with rumination, as when the pedlar speculates of Margaret,

Her temper had been framed, as if to make
A Being, who by adding love to peace
Might live on earth a life of happiness.

(ll. 517-19)
The pedlar interrupts his story also with brief addresses to the poet, alluding once, for example, to the past: "but you I think / Can scarcely bear it now in mind" (ll. 535-36), reinstating the dramatic framework and preparing the reader for the pause in his tale, when the context of telling is again the poet's.

The first part of Margaret's story concerns her life with Robert, the serenity of which is disrupted by blight and war (suggesting again the interdependency of human and natural harmonies). What the pedlar, true to his characteristic perspective, brings us of that life are images of the linkage of Robert's activity with the cycles of nature; of work attuned to the seasons and the daily revolutions of the earth, "at his loom, / In summer, ere the mower was abroad .... in early spring, / Ere the last star had vanished" (ll. 524-27); and in his garden "until the light / Had failed" (ll. 530-31). Robert's deracination is also expressed in terms of his relationship with nature, now a relationship of dislocation, in which he passes time in idle occupations:

and with a strange,  
Amusing, yet uneasy, novelty,  
He mingled, where he might, the various tasks  
Of summer, autumn, winter, and of spring.  
(ll. 574-77)

This dislocation from nature poisons his human relationships also, making him a capricious and undependable parent:
One while would he speak lightly of his babes,
And with a cruel tongue: at other times
He tossed them with a false unnatural joy.
(11. 585-87)

But although what is described in Robert's activity,
these things are of concern to the pedlar as the central
realities of Margaret's existence. His access to them is
through her: "She with pride would tell" of Robert's
industry. And as Robert deteriorates, the effect on
Margaret emerges forcefully where the pedlar quotes her:

'Every smile,'
Said Margaret to me, here beneath these trees,
'Made my heart bleed.'
(11. 589-91)

Here, on Margaret's words, the pedlar pauses in
his story. The pause is effective both in placing emphasis
on the sorrow that has entered Margaret's world, and as a
dramatic response of the speaker, who seems for the time
too grieved to continue. The pedlar recalls himself to
the present, "the hour of deepest noon," when he sits with
the poet, connecting past and present in the concrete image
of the "enormous elms," "these trees" beneath which Margaret
spoke and where the pedlar is now recreating her past.
Elements of the natural scene--here, the elms, earlier,
the well--which have been closely connected with human life
serve now as a nexus between past and present. Nature
functions too in another way: even as he chides himself
for disturbing "the calm of nature with . . . restless
thoughts" (1. 604), the pedlar is himself calmed by the
peace of the surrounding scene. The poet-narrator tells us

there was in his face
Such easy cheerfulness, a look so mild,
That for a little time it stole away
All recollection.

(11. 606-09)

And the poet in turn is affected by the pedlar's response, and thus, indirectly, by nature. Instead of the fixed and desolate "roofless Hut; four naked walls / That stared upon each other" (1. 30) that presented itself to him in the beginning, he now sees a "tranquil Ruin" (1. 623). He is deeply involved in Margaret's story and begs the old man to continue.

The remainder of the tale differs in technique from the opening section. Where Robert's ill fate was related chiefly through summary, Margaret's is related in a series of four scenes, representing the pedlar's intermittent visits to her, in which Margaret appears at varying distance; the story culminates in a summary relation of her last years, during which the pedlar's travels kept him away, so that he has the story by hearsay.

Since the pedlar's access to Margaret's internal state is limited to what he might plausibly observe or hear, that internal state is rendered almost exclusively symbolically, through observable changes in her garden. Jonathan Wordsworth, in his chapter on the symbolism of
the garden, lucidly demonstrates the manner in which Wordsworth uses the relationship between Margaret and her garden "as a means of telling his story." He writes:

> gardening in The Ruined Cottage is at no stage merely symbolical. . . . It is the human side of a bond with Nature which for Wordsworth himself increases in significance while the poem is being composed, but which is implied in the earliest descriptions of Margaret's garden.\(^{15}\)

I would add to this the observation that Wordsworth, in limiting his point of view to that of the "I"-as-Witness, constrains himself to some such a strategy. The way in which point of view may condition the matter told is particularly striking here. The manner of telling is consonant in every respect with the capacities and limitations of the teller. The symbolic use of the garden as an index of Margaret's inner state is the product at least in part of the pedlar's restricted access to that state. Again, the pedlar's faith in nature is of a quite literal kind; thus, in the degeneration of Margaret's garden literal and symbolic significancies blur together. The disorder of the garden not only symbolizes abrogation of the human bond with nature, but is the living, actual result of such abrogation. It is characteristic of the pedlar's calling that he visit Margaret only occasionally; and this habit makes the series of dramatized scenes that correspond to his visits a natural mode of narrating.

\(^{15}\) The Music of Humanity, p. 109.
In these ways, the limitation of point of view has given Wordsworth his technique.

In the first of the pedlar's visits, where Margaret tells of Robert's defection, her surroundings have changed little. Her physical attitude, however, is eloquent:

Margaret looked at me
A little while; then turned her head away
Speechless,—and, sitting down upon a chair,
Wept bitterly.

(11. 648-51)

But by the time the pedlar leaves, she is "busy with her garden tools," occupied and connected with nature. The time is spring, Robert has been gone less than two months, and Margaret's "words of hope" are fitted to the circumstances.

As the year wears on, the pedlar returns in mid-summer. Margaret is absent. The process of deterioration has begun, the cottage and vegetable garden overgrown with weeds and flowers. Margaret's child cries alone inside the empty house. When Margaret returns, she herself testifies to the change:

"I perceive
You look at me, and you have cause; today
I have been travelling far; and many days
About the fields I wander, knowing this
Only, that what I seek I cannot find;
And so I waste my time: for I am changed."

(11. 762-67)

In the same way that the Pedlar's "animal being" was threatened with engulfment by the transcendent imagination seeking its fulfillment, Margaret is drawn away from the
supports of existence by her single consuming passion, dedicated to a reunion that is outside the possibilities of life to afford. And no "stern yet kindly Spirit" leads her to an alternative. The process once begun proves inexorable.

The final scenes depict the gradual stripping away of all her ties to life. In the pedlar's third visit, it is again spring, but her house "Bespake a sleepy hand of negligence," while her garden is an earnest of approaching death. Of Margaret herself we see little; and when she does appear, she is marked by a kind of inertia. Looking at the damaged apple tree, she expresses only the fear that "it will be dead and gone / Ere Robert come again." All of life revolves around the same point of reference, a single fixed passion, the hope of Robert's return. Her final words urge the pedlar to persist in asking "for him whom she had lost" (l. 868), in the last of his four visits.

The sense of immediacy that marks the first two scenes weakens in the third, where Margaret's appearance and words are given little space, and is almost totally absent in the last, the pedlar's fourth and final visit, where a single image shows her walking with the pedlar "along the miry road, / Heedless how far," and her speech is narrated summarily and indirectly. This distancing has the dual effect of making Margaret seem to slip away,
to be less and less a palpable, living being, and of
sparing the reader a minute depiction of her sufferings
at the end. In the first visits, too, the pedlar com-
ments on and reacts to the story, reaching a climax in his
emotional response in that most poignant passage of medi-
tation where he fantasizes that Margaret is

> By sorrow laid asleep; or borne away,
> A human being destined to awake
> To human life, or something very near
> To human life, when he shall come again
> For whom she suffered.

(11. 786-90)

Insofar as the action concerns the pedlar, this is a cli-
max; but in the concentric action that concerns Margaret,
I would agree with Jonathan Wordsworth who isolates the
dreadful inertia that has overtaken Margaret by the third
visit as the turning point for her.16 These separate
climaxes, made possible by the double point of view in the
work, remind us again of the mediating consciousness of
the pedlar, of a consciousness moreover that is separated
from the matter being narrated by time and foreknowledge
of the end. In short, the doubling of climax lays emphasis
again on the double drama that the tale advances.

For the final events of the story, Wordsworth

16 The Music of Humanity, p. 141. Though I
accept Jonathan Wordsworth's reading of this as a
climactic point, I cannot agree that "Margaret has
apparently given up hope of Robert's return." She
herself believes this, perhaps, but the careful
placement of Robert's belongings gives the lie to
her belief.
achieves a Greek decorum by having the pedlar summarize from hearsay accounts. The pedlar's distance from the events succeeds in blurring the sharp edge of Margaret's agony. But the extended and unvarying nature of that agony is admirably rendered through summary. Summary rarely achieves a heightening of emotional effect, but in this instance the presentation of Margaret's actions as habitual, endlessly repeated, does precisely that—underlines the frightful duration of her passion and the fixity of the "one tormented hope" that consumes her. While summary permits these effects, it answers also to the demands of verisimilitude, as the pedlar's calling quite plausibly removes him from the scene and thus deprives him of detailed, first-hand knowledge.

Yet against the emotional blurring created by summary in this passage runs a counterpoint of specific detail. Margaret's suffering is not to be dismissed as the event of "ages long ago." The presence of the pedlar and the poet in the self-same spot where she suffered endows the narrative with concrete power. The pedlar vividly recreates the years of waiting, Margaret's sitting for hours, pacing the garden, asking of every passerby for word of her husband, simultaneously immobilized and driven by her hope. And in the end, she is destroyed completely by that hope, her physical being sacrificed to it, the shelter and support of her cottage and garden
given over to wild, inhospitable nature.

In terms of Wordsworth's myth, Margaret fails. Once the fabric of her life has been rent, she cannot continue, but is drawn by the tyranny of her imagination away from human existence altogether, gradually stripped of the necessities of life and overcome by the equally indifferent forces of nature and her own fixed passion, a passion indifferent to all but its own object. Where the pedlar was led to take the awful secrets learned on the mountaintops into the human sphere, and finds in human life forms that fulfill and correspond to his deep knowledge, Margaret's crisis cuts her off from life, dehumanizes her, until at length she is absorbed by the forces of nature. Her garden runs wild, her child dies, she herself sinks to decay with her cottage. Yet these things are sacrificed to the demands of what is most spiritual in human nature—however potentially destructive—the imagination, which seeks to transcend and transform natural fact. For Margaret, that seeking leads to the tragic waste of life. Only through the mediating consciousness of the pedlar can her sacrifice achieve any value. As Hartman remarks, "though the pedlar describes in Margaret a consciousness born of betrayal and careless of nature, his own grows patiently around her sufferings." 17

17 *Wordsworth's Poetry*, p. 139.
The final scene of the poem dramatizes that patient growth of consciousness, completing the dramatic frame. The poet moves, through his act of benediction, beyond the "impotence of grief," even as the pedlar's act of telling, in itself a memorial and benediction to Margaret, has allayed his fixed consciousness of death. As the reflective consciousness of poet and pedlar move about the stark tragedy of Margaret, "the calm oblivious tendencies / Of nature" are seen at last to transform the desolate hut that was the scene of her agony. It is precisely the framing structure of point of view, the placing of Margaret's story within the more immediate story of the meeting between poet and pedlar that achieves this humanizing effect. The attainment of perspective, the emancipation of consciousness from the tunnel vision of the present, is seen to occur both in the pedlar, whose initial vision of the cottage incurs a fixed sense of loss, but who transcends that confined vision in the act of communicating it to another human mind; and in the poet, who labors doggedly across the common to a refuge he perceives as an inhospitable, self-staring ruin, aware as he labors that a different vantage point would alter his perception of the landscape, just as the pedlar's command of the past, once transmitted, alters both characters' perception of the present. In the act of transmission, consciousness grows and fulfills itself.
The Excursion, Book I depends for its effect on an established narrative procedure, the "I"-as-Witness point of view, and achieves a heightening of the emphasis on the narrator's subjectivity—inhherent in the point of view—by framing one witness's account within that of another. In the years following, however, years which saw the production in collaboration with Coleridge of the Lyrical Ballads, Wordsworth experimented also with other points of view, chiefly an idiosyncratic use of Editorial Omniscience, and the "I"-as-Protagonist frame, and began to employ unreliable narration as a means of focusing on the evolving and uncertain nature of perception. The "I"-as-Protagonist frame, as this is represented in Wordsworth's contributions to the Lyrical Ballads, tended to produce works which are less narrative in their essential form than dramatic lyric, that is to say, monologues in which the state of mind of the speaker is not alone the primary, but by and large the exclusive, concern.¹⁸ But both "I"-as-Witness and "I"-as-Protagonist points of view also produced works that dramatize the precarious and shifting engagement of the narrator's consciousness with story material.

¹⁸The wider implications of the concentration of dramatic lyrics and dramatic monologues among the Lyrical Ballads are taken up by Stephen Parrish ("Dramatic Technique in the Lyrical Ballads," PMLA, LXXIV (1959), 85-97) and by Robert Langbaum (The Poetry of Experience [London, 1957], pp. 38-73).
The most radically unreliable narrator that Wordsworth constructed is the sea-captain who narrates "The Thorn." While he is therefore an exceptional case he none-theless exemplifies the central interests of Wordsworth's narrative art at this period. Through the "I"-as-Witness point of view, the sea-captain provides an incomplete, ambiguous account of a woman in the village to which he has retired, one Martha Ray, who many years ago was betrayed by her lover and, it is suggested, may have murdered her child by that lover. At the time of the poem's telling, she is reputed to be in the habit of visiting the thorn bush of the title to mourn the child. Wordsworth saw the poem as an attempt to dramatize through the character of the sea-captain "some of the general laws by which superstition acts on the mind,"¹⁹ offering his commentary in the 1800 edition in response to charges that the poem was excessively obscure.

Indeed, the degree of unreliability of the narrator is difficult to ascertain.²⁰ The prevailing view among recent critics has largely accorded with that of Parrish, who argues that

the point of the poem may very well be that its central "event" has no existence outside the narrator's

¹⁹ PW, II, 512.
²⁰ For discussion of the demands of unreliable narration, see Booth, The Rhetoric of Fiction, pp. 271-393.
imagination—that there is no Martha Ray sitting in a scarlet cloak behind a crag on the mountaintop, that the narrator has neither seen nor heard her, that what he has seen is a gnarled old tree in a blinding storm, that what he has heard (besides the creaking of the branches, or the whistling of the mountain wind) is village superstition about a woman wronged years ago.21

While the obsessive quality of the narrator's mind makes itself felt from the outset in the involuted and repetitive syntax he employs, and in the morbid fascination he exhibits in the spot he describes—the thorn bush "Not higher than a two years' child," whose covering mosses seem to him malevolently "bent... To drag it to the ground," the hillock which he compares to "an infant's grave in size"—morbid fascination with the place may signal an imbalance in outlook and thus render the narrator's account of his world unreliable to some extent, but it does not mean that he has invented any part of that world or confounded fantasy with reality in the way that Parrish suggests. Wordsworth takes some pains, I believe, to make plain that what the old sea-captain relates is accurate at the factual level. It is the effect of this matter on the narrator's mind that Wordsworth brings out—and conversely the effect of the narrator's mind on what he relates, so that the spot of landscape comes to appear fraught with obscure and unspeakable horrors.

Though the narrator is not fully reliable and is the sole channel of information, uncorrected and uncorroborated by the other speaker, no indication exists in the poem that any of the information he relates is of his own invention. Initially he provides a description of the thorn and the woman, "a queer but factual account that could stand by itself," Hartman calls it; this account is presumably volunteered. The remaining thirteen or so stanzas spoken by the sea-captain offer the history of Martha Ray's betrayal, which, although it occurred before he came into the region, he presents as factual; and an account of the rumors and superstitions that have grown around the mystery of Martha's visible pregnancy which produced no visible issue. The narrator distinguishes between what he takes to be fact and what mere gossip, and gives us no reason to doubt him; but in relation to the latter, the rumors and gossip, he exhibits an attitude of profound ambivalence, an attitude that emerges through his interaction with the other speaker.

The intervention of this other speaker, while it occupies only a few lines of the work, is a central and largely overlooked stimulus to the sea-captain's dramatic self-revelation. Only at the repeated and insistent demands of this other is the sea-captain brought to retail

22Wordsworth's Poetry, p. 372.
the mystery that attaches to the place. This interaction with another person has the effect of making his account dramatic in the sense that it is a dynamic and evolving response to an immediate situation, rather than merely the reiteration of an idée fixe. In responding to pressure from the other, he acquires the air of saying more than he intends, of betraying himself into revelations which he would not otherwise make.

Though he apparently volunteered his initial account, his response to the other's request for more information is an unequivocal assertion of ignorance: "I cannot tell; I wish I could; / For the true reason no one knows" (11. 89-90). But in response to the repeated urging of the other he overcomes his reluctance to retail the village story, and the tale, once well launched, possesses him—as it possesses "grey-haired Wilfred of the glen" who still discusses the events twenty years after they happened. Midway through his tale the narrator again claims "More I know not, I wish I did, / And it should all be told to you" (11. 144-45). But he continues to enlarge for another four stanzas from which there emerges the pattern of a mind obsessively circling, denying knowledge, shying away from the puzzle, but retailing what "some remember well" of Martha's visits to the mountain and what "many swear, / Were voices of the dead" issuing thence, falling as he does so under
the spell of his own tale. He so far believes the tales of horror to assert, with undue vehemence, "I cannot think, whate'er they say, / They had to do with Martha Ray" (ll. 164-65). The very denial, with its air of protesting too much, accords a fatal measure of validity to the rumors denied. In spite of his scepticism, of his care to distinguish between the verifiable facts of Martha Ray's life and the hearsay that has grown around them, his mind is infected with the horror and morbid sensationalism of the village gossip. He has betrayed himself from the very first in the language steeped in implied horror with which he described the spot; and in the final stanzas, he exhibits an unwilling and unwitting credence in the wild suspicions of the village—even as he denies according any belief to them:

"I've heard, the moss is spotted red
With drops of that poor infant's blood;
But kill a new-born infant thus,
I do not think she could!"

(ll. 210-13)

Though he would not believe, the insistence of the other speaker releases in him a morbid fascination with the case and a compulsive need to talk that leads him into retailing all the gruesome imaginings that surround Martha Ray. In the act of telling, he becomes infected with the horror that he wishes so ardently to deny.

The narrator is unreliable, then, not because he misrepresents anything at a factual level, nor even
because his knowledge of the case is incomplete. Indeed he distinguishes conscientiously between what is known and what only alleged concerning Martha. It is rather that his knowledge of himself is seriously incomplete, that he is unconsciously ambivalent about the ugly rumors. Even as he overtly discounts them, unwittingly he reveals that he entertains them. This I take to be the chief effect of superstition acting on the mind: like the "heavy tufts of moss that strive / To drag [the thorn] to the ground" (ll. 234-35), the ugly superstitions, once admitted to the mind of the sea-captain, threaten its balance, fatally burden it, for all his efforts to throw them off and adhere to the truth of his own experience.

In others of the narratives included in *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth employs varying degrees of unreliability to dramatize the subjective coloring which the narrator throws over the tale he tells, and at times to involve the narrator in a drama of dawning perception as he approximates a "truer" vision of his story material. A further ambiguity arises from Wordsworth's use of Editorial Omniscience, in which the dramatic "I" narrator, far from being a straightforward authorial presence, occupies a place on the fringes of the action he narrates, and like an "I"-as-Witness tends to be acquainted at least indirectly with the characters of his story and familiar with its locale. Thus Wordsworth combines the
range of information available to an omniscient teller with the limited moral authority of the individualized witness. In certain of the tales, the narrator presents himself as the relayer of received material, the authority for which is folklore or village legend. In many instances we may infer that privileged information—as for example the mental states of characters—has been "received" along with the other elements of the tales. But the narrators generally take no pains to establish their access. Their authority for what they relate is rather left ambiguous, suggesting a certain freedom with the facts, and an authority that derives more from imaginative sources than from the empirical world. On the other hand, the narrators of these tales typically go to some lengths to establish the local and familiar nature of the stories they relate, suggesting thereby a commitment to a certain kind of story material for art, the "incidents and situations from common life" that the "Preface" of 1800 refers to. Even in cases where the narrator is more or less "reliable," the effect of individualizing him, of dramatizing him as a character while he is nonetheless omniscient as regards the information at his command, is to remove his moral omniscience and render him capable only of fallible, circumstantial and experiential interpretation of the world of his story.

The stories tend to have a double focus, then,
deriving their interest partly from the action in which the characters are involved, and partly from the concurrent action of the narrator's own drama. Parrish has recognized this double focus in the "Idiot Boy," where he notes that "the poem's passion arises almost as much from the speaker's play of mind and turns of emotion as from the characters' speech or behavior." And indeed the narrator of "The Idiot Boy"—in spite of his omniscient access to facts—makes a strong claim to our considering him as a character in his own right. His point of view is "hybrid" in the sense that I have outlined, combining elements of Editorial Omniscience with elements of the "I"-as-Witness frame. He is outside the action concerning Betty, Susan and Johnny, and can move freely from one vantage point to another, as when he shifts from the reunion of Betty and Johnny to tell us how Susan has been occupied. He can also present inside views of the minds of Betty and Susan, and even, comically, of the pony, in lines 112-16. Thus he is not bound by the chief limitations of a witness narrator, characterized by Friedman as having "no more than ordinary access to the mental states of others." Yet he is


24 The phrase is Booth's, used to signify the private thoughts of a character which are not realistically available to a witness narrator. See The Rhetoric of Fiction, pp. 160-63.

25 "Point of View in Fiction," p. 1174.
unreliable, "a condescending apprentice poet," as Andrew Griffin has called him,\textsuperscript{26} not in every respect competent as a poet, and not a fully dependable interpreter of the world of his story. The narrator and his act of narration are here dramatized to the point that he is seen to operate in a frame of action outside that which he tells concerning the other characters, a frame in which he has only the limited moral authority of an individual.

In some respects, however, he is highly competent. In those matters which concern the known and knowable actions of Betty and Susan, the narrator displays a high degree of confidence in his superior intelligence, and indeed superior capabilities as a story-teller. He renders with great sympathy and vividness the maternal emotions of Betty, her pride as Johnny sets out and her mounting anxiety and anger at the boy, whom she reviles as a "little idle sauntering thing," when he fails to return. The whole treatment of Betty is overlaid and enriched, as Mary Jacobus points out, by the narrator's clearly audible voice, "dramatizing the stance of amused indulgence which the reader is invited to share."\textsuperscript{27} But the reader had better beware of too close an identification with this

\textsuperscript{26} "Wordsworth and the Problem of Imaginative Story: The Case of 'Simon Lee,'" \textit{PMLA}, 92 (1977), 398.

indulgent, ironic voice. In spite of his understanding of Betty and the conviction with which he relates her thoughts and actions, he reveals his distance from her where he drops her abruptly: "All that to herself she talked, / Would surely be a tedious tale" (ll. 205-6). His real interest lies with Johnny, the impenetrable idiot child whose thoughts no one shares. What an effusion of sudden emotion marks his address to the reader on this topic:

Oh Reader! now that I might tell
What Johnny and his Horse are doing!
What they've been doing all this time,
Oh could I put it into rhyme,
A most delightful tale pursuing!

(ll. 312-16)

And pursue his desire he does, through four stanzas of fantasy that reveal much about the narrator himself, and nothing about Johnny. These flights of fancy permit the narrator to conceive of a world not bounded by fact, where stars may be plucked from mountaintops and everything in the natural scene becomes the source of strange and uncanny adventures. But the narrator remains aware that these are his fantasies, that the world of the child is closed to him. His fantasies are all conditioned by the word "perhaps" in each stanza, coupled in the first with the encouraging little aside, "and no unlikely thought!", designed surely to persuade the narrator himself. Through fancy, he can project an invented version of the
child's world, but he cannot sustain it, so that he falls to scolding and pleading with his Muses (ll. 337-46).

The return to his story is loaded with irony and unconscious self-revelation:

Who's yon, that, near the waterfall,
Which thunders down with headlong force,
Beneath the moon, yet shining fair,
As careless as if nothing were,
Sits upright on a feeding horse?

(ll. 347-51)

In his lust for adventure, the narrator almost fails to recognize Johnny, and almost overlooks the wonder of the natural world and the child who is at one with it, embraced along with the other elements of the scene by the moonlight. From another standpoint, the poet's true province, which he is in danger of ignoring, turns out to be the world of nature and of men; the imagination finds its object in the everyday world, observed with a steady and discerning eye, and not in the realms of fantasy. What appears in plain view becomes the source of intensity and excitement, is matter such as "we in romances read."

The narrator's lesson is completed by Johnny's words at the end of the poem which supply the final puncture to inflated fancy:

'The cocks did crow to-whoo, to-whoo,
And the sun did shine so cold!'

(ll. 450-51)

Johnny's tale represents both less and more than the
narrator could conceive of. Though the child can reverse the very revolution of the earth to perceive day instead of night, his perception is grounded in the familiar, trivial, commonplace events of the rural world he inhabits. His imagination, and this is the lesson he teaches the narrator, operates to transform and not to escape reality. When the narrator contents himself with Johnny's "very words," he succeeds in affording us a momentary glimpse of the child's mysterious inner life and of a world transformed by that mystery.

While "The Idiot Boy" contains "a comic view of strong emotions," 28 burlesque of the melodramatic fashion in balladry, 29 and mock-heroic elements, its larger comic dimensions have to do with the narrator's own character. Certainly, Betty's emotions are presented in a comic light; but the narrator also, inadvertently, presents himself in a comic light, and dramatic irony in the form of collusion between Wordsworth and the reader abounds. The action of telling itself is comically executed, dramatizing a comic view of the problems of creating art. After fourteen years experience as a poet, the narrator is still drawn toward fantastic invention, and frustrated when his inspiration fails him. Having overlooked his


true province completely for a time, he almost fails to recognize the principal character of his tale when he returns to it. He excels at depicting the ordinary emotions of the distraught mother, but thinks this a tedious tale—Johnny's unknowable experience is much more fascinating. The idiot child has indeed much to teach him, but the narrator goes about learning the wrong way, and must experience the failure of his inspiration before he is constrained to look steadily at his true subject. Viewed in this way, the poem is more about the narrator's experience in telling that it is about any of the characters' experiences within the story. 30

In "The Thorn" and "The Idiot Boy" Wordsworth uses unreliable narration to underscore the role of subjectivity in storytelling (and ultimately to dramatize the extent to which human reality is constituted both of what we half-create and of what we half-perceive). A related effect of "unreliable omniscience" used in "The Idiot Boy" is to create alongside the matter narrated a second, lyric or dramatic dimension, the narrator's developing perception which takes place outside the time-frame of the story he narrates. In other narratives, "Peter Bell," composed in 1798 and initially intended

30 The narrator's centrality in the work is asserted also by Albert Wilhelm, in "The Dramatized Narrator in Wordsworth's 'The Idiot Boy,'" Journal of Narrative Technique, 5 (1975), 16-23.
for publication in *Lyrical Ballads*, "Michael," which replaced Coleridge's unfinished "Christabel" in the 1800 edition, and "The Waggoner," written in 1805, for example, Wordsworth creates such a lyric context through the use of more "reliable" narrators, Editorial-Omniscient "I"s who are not prey to the kinds of bewilderment that beset the earlier two narrators, but who are dramatized and located in relation to the story-world.

Parrish finds Wordsworth after the *Lyrical Ballads* of 1798 moving "away not only from . . . experimental techniques but from the dramatic method in general." He cites "Michael" as a work which Wordsworth "might have cast in dramatic form," but where instead "he himself assumed the role of narrator." As a result, "the pathos which pervades the poem arises from the utterance of the poet himself, speaking 'in his own person and character.'"\(^{31}\)

But this is too facile an identification of the narrator with the historical person of the poet. The view expressed by Griffin, that a continuity of artistic concern and experimental technique is discernible "through 'Michael' and 'Hart-Leap Well,' in the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, and at least as far as *The White Doe of Rylstone*," more accurately describes Wordsworth's practice. Griffin finds all of these poems "'lyrical ballads' indeed, crossing genres and flying in the face of accepted

\(^{31}\)"Dramatic Technique in the *Lyrical Ballads*," p. 97.
practice . . . analyzing what it is in us that narratives do satisfy and what, in contrast, the imagination cherishes."^{32}

While the later narratives do indeed make widespread use of the privileges of Editorial Omniscience, including the freedom to comment, to enter characters' minds, and to shift vantage point, in the degree to which they characteristically dramatize the editorial "I" they are unusual. The narrators of "Peter Bell," "Michael," and "The Waggoner" occupy positions expressly related in time and space to the worlds of their stories and function as fictional entities in their own right.\textsuperscript{33} One of the primary purposes of thus dramatizing the Editorial-Omniscient narrator, of providing a fictional context apart from the narrated story, in which the narrator is seen to act and react, is to make narrative the occasion for examining the art of storytelling, to dramatize its problems and question its significance.

Even such a deservedly little-read work as "Hart-Leap Well" bears the marks of the impulse to self-examination

\textsuperscript{32}"The Problem of Imaginative Story," p. 393.

\textsuperscript{33}In that these narrators are acquainted with the setting and to some extent with the characters of their tales, we might regard them as "privileged witnesses" (see Booth, p. 160). But even viewed in this light they are still unconventional since their privilege is great enough to qualify as omniscience. However we view them, we must have recourse to more than one category of point of view to analyze them fully.
that runs through Wordsworth's narrative at this time. Though the Editorial Omniscient and "I"-as-Witness frames are not embodied in one narrator, both are represented in the work. The first part of the poem is a ballad which tells from the Editorial-Omniscient point of view of an extraordinary stag-hunt, and of the monument raised by the hunter, Sir Walter, to mark the place where the stag made a fatal leap. The second part relates the arrival of the speaker, an "I"-as-Witness narrator, at a mysterious place, Hart-Leap Well, the story of which (we are only now told) was given him by a shepherd as he has related it in part one. In the subsequent exchange between the speaker, who has identified himself as a poet, and the shepherd, the long-ago victory of Sir Walter appears as an act of wanton violence against a harmless animal, for which nature has taken the revenge of making the spot grimly barren.

Though the insistent didactism of the second part is irritating, the two parts achieve nonetheless an interesting relation to each other. By withholding the source from which the story came and the context in which it was told by the shepherd until after it has been relayed yet again by the poet, Wordsworth invites us to perceive it first as something antic, folkloric, expressive of the pleasures of the chase. The second part then functions to reevaluate the first, to set the events of the hunt against the shepherd's simple reverence for nature, thereby
exposing the underlying barbarism of the hunt, and destroy-
ing too the reader's pleasure in that form of poetry which
glorifies barbaric pastimes: once again, Wordsworth re-
duces and supplants "gross and visible action."

But the disruption of normal chronology functions
at another level to place the accent on the shaping act of
the poet. Not only is the hunt past, but the moment at
which the poet "from Hawes to Richmond did repair,"
and
met a shepherd on the way, is also past. The act of relay-
ing both sets of events is present, however, both in the
apparently formulaic asides of the first part (e.g., "I
will not stop to tell how far he fled" 1. 30), and in the
explicit signals with which the transition from first part
to second is executed:

But there is matter for another rhyme,
And I to this would add another tale.

PART SECOND

The moving accident is not my trade . . .

Only at the level of the dramatized act of composition do
the two parts of the poem cohere. Viewed purely as story,
it falls into two neat halves, a tale and a series of
reflections on that tale, that remain, to borrow a meta-
phor from the chemists, in suspension. In the lyric
dimension, however, the flashback, the tonal uncertainty
that leads the speaker to define his "trade," the dichotomy
between the styles--"'martial' and 'pastoral' . . .
distinct modalities of imagination," as they have been called by Hartman—in short, the very imperfections of the poem become the stuff out of which the struggle to create is rendered.

In spite of its early date of composition, "Peter Bell" is more typical than "Hart-Leap Well" of Wordsworth's narrative procedure after 1800. The story of Peter Bell's conversion is narrated from a more or less reliable Editorial-Omniscient point of view—the privilege of presenting inside views is useful, not to say indispensable, where the narrated action centers upon the mental state of the protagonist. Yet by virtue of his being dramatized in a fictional context in which he is realized as a character among others, the narrator has no more moral authority than an ordinary witness. His editorial commentary, far from having the air of absolute veracity that generally attaches to Editorial Omniscience, is evidently the play of one mind around the events narrated.

Although the narrator here is no bumbling apprentice poet, the lyric movement of the "Prologue" is analogous to that of "The Idiot Boy," for the poet is temporarily beguiled by the blandishments of false inspiration, accepting as his preferred mode of conveyance the whimsical boat symbolic of supernatural imagination. The boat is a rather silly and unconvincing device—whether intentionally so or not is hard to determine—and it yields in the second
half to the poet's recognition that his true inspiration arises from the "common growth of mother-earth," and the emotions of daily life.

The story proper of Peter Bell illustrates the creed which the poet has attained: common emotions, sorrow, fear, and repentance, transform the world for Peter and redeem his black heart. But the story is part of a larger context and is contained within a dramatized act of telling, in which we attend as much to the performance of the speaker as to the content of his speech. Though the tale of a degenerate man awakened to his state through the genial offices of nature and the severer promptings of his own mind doubtless interested Wordsworth, the story of Peter's adventures is not the exclusive concern of the poem. Equally important is the drama of the narrator, whose jocular tone and occasional digressions and uncertainties intrude into the story to remind us of the role played by his consciousness in the presentation and shaping of Peter's redemption.

At the end of the "Prologue" the scene is set in highly visual, concrete detail—not the scene of Peter's adventures, but that in which the act of story-telling takes place:

"To the stone table in my garden, 
Loved haunt of many a summer hour, 
The Squire is come: his daughter Bess 
Beside him in the cool recess 
Sits blooming like a flower."
He goes on to create the picture of a rustic gathering waiting for him. This familiar and domestic scene constitutes his final argument against the boat and its promises of unearthly visions, and it also brings the narrator sharply into focus as a character, representing him as physically present in a specific time and place. The beginning of the story proper, in which the narrator starts in medias res but reverses this procedure in response to the Squire's objections, places emphasis on the manner of telling and on the relationships between teller, audience, and tale. While only a handful of other explicit addresses to the audience are made, an implicit consciousness of their needs and responses informs the whole. As Peter gazes into the pool, for example, the three stanzas of questions that the narrator asks (ll. 501-15) represent on the one hand the thoughts passing through Peter's mind, but on the other are an exercise in audience manipulation, drawing the listeners in and creating suspense.

Not only the audience, but the hero and his story are toyed with, treated with ironic detachment. The narrator is obviously having fun where he describes Peter's uneasiness in the secluded glade:

All, all is silent--rocks and woods,  
All still and silent--far and near!  
Only the Ass, with motion dull,  
Upon the pivot of his skull  
Turns round his long left ear.
Thought Peter, What can mean all this?
Some ugly witchcraft must be here!
—Once more the Ass, with motion dull,
Upon the pivot of his skull
Turned round his long left ear.

(11. 411-20)

The pseudo-solemn repetition and the absurdly portentous
detail are evidences of the narrator's ironic distance
from Peter. He even derives a kind of spiteful glee from
the commencement of Peter's well-deserved punishment.
When Peter sees blood-spots behind him in the lane, the
narrator comments:

| Ha! why these sinkings of despair? |
| He knows not how the blood comes there— |
| And Peter is a wicked man. |

(11. 723-25)

The structure of the tale also serves to bring
the narrator into focus as a dramatic presence. His head-
long plunge into the start of his story, corrected by the
Squire's demand for some background, has already been
noted. As he begins the third part, far from plunging in,
his problem now is a reluctance to continue so that he
digresses for some ten stanzas, telling a little anecdote
and addressing himself to the Spirits of the Mind, exhort-
ing them to do their work on Peter Bell. These examples
of the narrator's human limitations do not involve any
unconscious self-revelation; in each instance, he is aware
of what he is doing. Beginning the story, he comments on
his own lack of composure, and plunges in deliberately:
"... straight, to cover my confusion, / Began the
promised Tale" (ll. 189-90). In the second case, he is quite conscious that he is digressing, and critical of his powers of narration in general:

--0, would that some more skilful voice
My further labour might prevent!
Kind Listeners, that around me sit,
I feel that I am all unfit
For such high argument.

--I've played, I've danced, with my narration;
I loitered long ere I began:
Ye waited then on my good pleasure;
Pour out indulgence still, in measure
As liberal as ye can!

(ll. 786-95)

To the degree that he fumbles with his story, illusion very naturally appears less complete. That the action of that evening's adventures is represented too as long past, finished, reduces its immediacy. By contrast, the dramatic context, the familiar and comfortable world of the garden, is ongoing and present, an action in which a poet tells a story to his friends, all the while playing to his audience, arousing suspense, reassuring them, asking their indulgence where his narrating is less than perfect. In this context the narrator is realized as a character, neither an unreliable bumbler nor an idealized representation of the poet, but a social, humorous, sensitive human being, attuned to the domestic and familiar reality he espouses as the matter of his poetry. We are aware throughout "Peter Bell" that the story we are hearing is a version of events that derives its structure, its tone,
and its value from the circumstances of its telling and the character of its teller.

In "Michael," the last of the *Lyrical Ballads*, we have a similar awareness of the character of the teller although a different sensibility pervades the work. In the first place, the domestic and familiar in its tragic aspect is the story material here. But in addition, it is a different kind of account, in that it creates the impression of being the product of communal recollection, a grave and deeply sympathetic version of Michael's betrayal that is part of the local lore and consciousness, and not the individual, highly circumstantial account of one man.

"Michael" was composed in two months in the late fall of 1800. The rapidity of its composition is borne out in the paucity of early drafts. Those drafts that do exist are marked by garrulity and repetitiveness and are of interest chiefly in that they point up the economy of the finished poem. Apart from the handful of blank verse passages related to "Michael" that DeSelincourt printed, Parrish has discovered an earlier treatment of the story consisting of

five roughly drafted stanzas of a ballad, touching on Michael's misfortunes in a semi-jocular way. From

\[34\] The drafts are printed by DeSelincourt, *PW*, II, 479-84.
these, Wordsworth seems to have drawn the central image of the sheepfold (scarcely mentioned in the blank verse lines), together with the central incident of the old man's tragic disappointment.\footnote{35 "Michael and the Pastoral Ballad," Bicentenary Wordsworth Studies, Jonathan Wordsworth, ed. (Cornell Univ. Press: Ithaca and London, 1970), p. 51. I have quoted from Parrish's transcription of the ballad—"Michael."}

In a bouncing anapestic metre, these stanzas present fragments of a scurrilous, mocking account of Michael's sorrow, "a doggerel strain," attributed to "Two shepherds... the two wits of the dale." The narrator counters their version, promising to relate the truth:

What old Michael once told me while on a loose stone One sweet summers morning depressed and alone By the edge of his sheepfold he sate.

Then follows a stanza in which Michael is heard addressing his son.

From the ballad fragments we can infer an embryonic narrative structure which is related to the work Wordsworth finally printed. Michael's story is represented as having some currency among the local population, though the shepherd-wits' version is rejected by the narrator as "thoughtless... falsehood." This local currency is preserved, but the shepherds' coarse perspective is transformed in the final poem into the serious and feeling recollection that is preserved in the community where Michael lived. But the narrator of the ballad—"Michael" is not only a member of that community; he also has direct
access to Michael himself. Wordsworth may even have intended in this early version to permit Michael to tell his own story, though the fragments do not make this conclusive. Certainly, Michael was to be brought before the reader with some immediacy, and this is not at all the case in the final work. For here, while the narrator is again represented as a member of the community of which he speaks, his access to the story is purely through the stories of that community and he has no first-hand contact with Michael. In the final structure, Wordsworth keeps Michael remote. His story is long finished, he himself long dead, and the only record that exists of him is the version preserved by the community he inhabited.

Critical commentary on "Michael" generally assumes that the narrator is a conventional Editorial-Omniscient presence, indistinguishable from Wordsworth. Karl Kroeber finds that here "Wordsworth dispenses with the fictive narrator" who in Kroeber's view is present in such works as "Peter Bell," "beginning with a direct address to the reader." But the structure of point of view in "Michael" is more like that in "Peter Bell" than Kroeber recognizes. As he himself points out, Wordsworth "tells the story as a neighbor of the shepherd might." But he combines

elements of the "I"-as-Witness point of view with an omniscient access to information. Like the narrator of "Peter Bell," the narrator of "Michael" inhabits a fictional world--Michael's world--in which he has first-hand knowledge of the unfinished sheepcote and access to neighbors who witnessed Michael's betrayal at the hands of Luke. But he is also privileged to know thoughts and actions which he could not have witnessed.

While the directness and familiarity of the opening lines are rhetorically disarming, they should not be taken as evidence that Wordsworth is speaking in his own person. At the same time that the introductory lines set the tone for what is to follow--simple, plain, domestic, and familiar--they establish the narrator's relationship to the story material, a point of view delicately balanced between "I"-as-Witness and Editorial-Omniscient modes, in which privileged material is either received with the outlines of the action or imaginatively reconstructed by the poet-narrator. In the opening paragraph the narrator takes the role of a guide who leads the reader through a forbidding mountain pass to the valley beyond it, to "an utter solitude" marked by a heap of stones. To these a story attaches of a very particular kind: one "not unfit . . . for the fireside, / Or for the summer shade," the scenes of homely communal life. It is moreover a "domestic tale," which the narrator has been told in his youth and which he is
retelling. The story is therefore explicitly identified as a received tale and the narrator explicitly puts himself in the service of relating it so that others, "a few natural hearts" and the "youthful Poets" who will inherit his place "among these hills," may derive from it the benefits he has.

This double focus on both the tragedy sustained by Michael and the significance of the story in the poet-narrator's moral life leads to Michael's being kept at some distance from the reader. On the one hand, the distance is a function of verisimilitude--the story concerns events and characters at a distant time in the past. On the other, however, it is the result of technical choice, in that the story is told in large part through summary, which Friedman calls "the normal untutored mode of storytelling," appropriate for a story that deliberately sets out to appear naive. Out of approximately 440 lines, if we subtract the opening address by the narrator, less than two hundred are given over to scene.

In the initial passages of summary, Michael's character and life as a shepherd for some eighty years are described, a life of close, intuitive harmony with nature for which he feels "A pleasurable feeling of blind love," an attachment reaffirmed and strengthened as it is shared

37"Point of View in Fiction," p. 1169.
with his son; a life too of impressive industry which
forges active bonds between the old man and the land and
unifies the family as they work in the evening together
by lamplight. But although Michael's life is presented
in detail, down even to his diet, Wordsworth's primary
interest here is not to create a vivid and convincing story
illusion. The immediacy of Michael as an individual is
blunted; he is presented by a narrator who summarizes
and interprets for us, and who has alluded in the intro-
duction to the second-hand nature of his material. A
brief physical description of Michael, present in the
early blank verse drafts (PW, II, 484), is omitted here.
Instead, we are told only of his "unusual strength."

Even when the ordered continuity of Michael's life
is threatened by legal obligation for his nephew's debts,
and he faces the loss of his inherited land and everything
he has worked for, the crisis is not dramatized initially,
but passed over rapidly:

This unlooked-for claim,
At the first hearing, for the moment took
More hope out of his life than he supposed
Any old man ever could have lost.

(11. 217-20)

We can infer the greatness of the initial shock, but there
is no attempt to render the complex of emotions that must
accompany it. Again, after the final blow of Luke's defec-
tion, by which Michael loses both the land and the son
for whose sake that land was more dear, Michael's grief is
summarized.

In the scenes that do occur, the narrator's access to information is that of an Editorial-Omniscient teller rather than of a neighbor in the valley or a witness within the fictional world. Though no witnesses were present when Michael and Isabel discussed the future of the land and decided to send Luke away, nor again when Michael took Luke into the valley to dedicate and lay the cornerstone of the sheepfold, these events are presented scenically, with a great deal of dialogue. Isabel's connection with her neighbors is alluded to more than once; it is easy then to conceive of her thoughts and private conversations becoming a matter of record. But Michael is solitary, sharing more with the departed Luke than with any other character. If we attempt to speculate on how a witness-narrator might realistically have access to the kind of information that the narrator of "Michael" relays, we must presuppose that the story of Michael, an oft-told tale, has been partly recorded and partly reconstructed by those who have told it. The narrator presents scenes that have perhaps come to him as part of the received whole, or that he has imaginatively reconstructed—the nature of his access to information is never made quite clear. But in that very ambiguity we find a clue to his function: he is one of a series of tellers, whose version of the story may be distinguished by his craft as a poet but is not distinguished
by any special moral authority. Rather than transcending the moral authority of its sources, his version depends for much of its value upon them.

At times the narrator makes direct reference to his sources. Some of these allusions serve, as Kroeber has pointed out, to "remind the reader that the story is . . . second-hand," though the claim immediately following, that the story is "chiefly significant for its effect upon the poet," is not so self-evident. Kroeber cites lines 93, 210, 451 etc., presumably because the narrator here makes reference to himself. But these references to self are invariably accompanied by reference also to others, the witnesses of the events, and in some instances these witnesses are cited without the narrator's referring to himself at all. At the same time that he reminds us of his own presence, then, he also reminds us of his sources, of the currency in local lore of Michael's story, so that a kind of dual consciousness obtains through which Michael is viewed: though the narrator judges and interprets the material he relays, he brings us not his own experience, nor his observation as a witness, but the collective observations of the neighboring community. In the first of those instances cited by Kroeber,

I may truly say,

---

38 Romantic Narrative Art, p. 81.
That they were as a proverb in the vale
For endless industry

(11. 93-95),

the emphasis is on Michael's industry as this has impressed itself on the other inhabitants of the valley. Similarly, the lamp which burns far into the night takes on symbolic power by being viewed through the lens of those others' consciousness:

And from this constant light, so regular,
And so far seen, the House itself, by all
Who dwelt within the limits of the vale,
Both old and young, was named THE EVENING STAR.

(11. 136-39)

Not Michael, nor the narrator, but the neighbors in the vale are the source of this perception.

The full significance of "all / Who dwelt within the limits of the vale" emerges at the end of the poem, as they are seen to receive and participate in Michael's tragedy. With Luke's defection, Michael has lost both his beloved son and the land. At first the narrator intrudes with a general observation—almost unique in this work, and for that reason particularly striking:

There is a comfort in the strength of love;
'Twill make a thing endurable, which else
Would overset the brain, or break the heart.

(11. 448-50)

This is the limit of the narrator's comment, however. He immediately evokes again the communal memory which has witnessed and preserved the events:

I have conversed with more than one who well
Remember the old Man, and what he was
Years after he had heard this heavy news.

(ll. 451-53)

The spare and moving account of Michael's activity in his final years has been supplied to the narrator by these neighbors, who have deeply felt and yet feel reverberations of grief:

'Tis not forgotten yet
The pity which was then in every heart
For the old Man—and 'tis believed by all
That many and many a day he thither went,
And never lifted up a single stone.

(ll. 462-66)

Jonathan Wordsworth has remarked on the great tact that marks the final lines of "Michael." Though the passage conveys deeply felt emotion, "its surface implications in fact play down Michael's suffering."^39 A number of distancing devices are working here to achieve this: in the first place, Michael's sorrow is treated in summary form. But it is also seen through layers of consciousness and memory, those of the poet-narrator who claims the significance of the story in his personal history, and those of the community which witnessed it and whose accounts are the living record of it. If the story's chief significance is indeed its effect on the poet, as Kroeber (and Hartman)^40 have maintained, in some sort its significance has been felt too by the whole community, of which the poet-narrator

---

^40 Wordsworth's Poetry, p. 262.
is one member. And the poet-narrator of "Michael" is no isolated servant of a sacred and mysterious fire, but a "man speaking to men," chronicler of a history which has made its mark on the mind of the community. The poem dramatizes the character of the poet that Wordsworth set forth in the "Preface" of the 1800 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*. And crucial to this description, apart from the heightened sensibility of the poet, is his representative-ness, his common humanity. While the solitary endurance of Michael is central to the values that the poem proposes, equally central is the communal consciousness which the events of Michael's life produce, and for which the poet-narrator is the unassuming spokesman.

In "Michael" teller and tale exist in a relationship of indivisible reciprocity. While the tale is presented as a *version* of events which owes a greater or lesser part of its shape and significance to the narrator's qualities of mind, those qualities have themselves been nurtured by and now find expression in the tale. Wordsworth's last narratives fall short of such seamless unity, although he continues to construct narrators who combine omniscient access to information with elements of the "I"-as-Witness frame, who are fictionally involved in the worlds of their stories and who dramatize in their own ways the transactions between the mind and the world outside it.
The seemingly conventional Editorial-Omniscient narrator of "The Waggoner" relates the adventures of a single night during which Benjamin, the waggoner of the title, through his tenderhearted assistance to a troubled family, is led to indulge his weakness for strong drink, is derelict in his duty as a waggoner, and is dismissed in the morning by an angry master. The dramatized or editorial element in the narration is minimal, however. Direct intrusions—first-person comments on the narrator's part—are confined to references to his function as a recorder of events and to the aid afforded by his muses: "I sing this rustic lay," or, again, "This sight to me the Muse imparts," formulaic intrusions that constitute no very full dramatization. His character and its effect on the story he tells are rather implied through his tone, from which emerges the picture of a mature and tolerant mind that lends psychological depth and mock-heroic comic appeal to the action he narrates.

But once the story of Benjamin is completed, the speaker continues in an epilogue of seventy lines or so (lines that exist in the earliest manuscripts and do not appear therefore to have been an afterthought) to create a very different relationship than has obtained in the course of his storytelling between himself and his material. Now, in an address to a "Friend," he drops the role of omniscient narrator and adopts instead the role of a
lyric speaker, examining and reflecting upon his act of composition. In a sense the epilogue may be no more than that—a direct address, presumably to Lamb, to whom the poem is dedicated, having little to do with the story it follows. But if we attempt to see the poem, story and epilogue both, as a unity, the narrator steps out of role at the end, and the epilogue forms a kind of palinode, contradicting nothing in the content of what has gone before, but calling in question the authority of the speaker. For the lyric speaker at the end identifies himself as an inhabitant of the locality in which he story takes place and claims first-hand knowledge of the waggoner. He is after all a partial witness, and like any ordinary mortal ought have "no more than ordinary access to the mental states of others" if the demands of verisimilitude are to be met. I would submit that once again Wordsworth sacrifices story-illusion to other values, deliberately focusing attention on the creative act of the narrator who fashions for the observable facts of his story an underlying set of psychological realities.

Though the epilogue to some extent undermines verisimilitude, it invites us to view the waggoner again, from an angle other than that which dominates the story. Now Benjamin becomes a contributor to the imaginative history of a poet, as the speaker retrieves and reaffirms the values for which the waggoner stood in his mind.
Benjamin is placed as a familiar figure in a familiar landscape, an embodiment of order and memory in an "uneventful place," existing in an active and mutual harmony with the natural world, an emblem of the grace and persistence of human toil. But in the instant of retrieval, memory gives way abruptly to the present consciousness of loss:

--But most of all, thou lordly Wain!
I wish to have thee here again,
When windows flap and chimney roars,
And all is dismal out of doors;

(IV, 244-47)

The absence of Benjamin is felt in images of a hostile nature and human privation, "The lame, the sickly, and the old," left now without the hospitable shelter of the wagon. The sense of loss in the epilogue strikes not as remembered grief, but as an emotion keenly felt in the present, made new through the operation of memory. The story itself has been told chiefly in the present tense, one effect of which is to lend immediacy to the events as though the narrator is imaginatively living through that night of adventures as he reconstructs it. The turn in the epilogue, which is quoted above, then marks his emergence from imaginative recreation. While the two parts of "The Waggoner," like those of "Hart-Leap Well," fall short of achieving full synthesis, the poem achieves values more rarefied than Wordsworth would seem to claim for it where he describes it modestly as "a play of the
fancy on a domestic incident and lowly character." The narrator brings a great breadth of editorial comment to his story, filling in matters of motivation, creating highly charged natural settings, and, through his tone, providing an ironic substratum to the action he relates. The epilogue then disrupts the conventional credibility of the story to expose the art behind it; and that lavish expenditure of care and invention in turn commands our belief in the significance perceived and lived anew in the act of composition, and in the loss sustained by the lyric poet who speaks his elegiac epilogue to a friend.

The last of Wordsworth's narrative poems, The White Doe of Rylstone, is something of an anomaly, a departure from most of the practice that we have observed throughout the Lyrical Ballads and that still make themselves felt in some degree in "The Waggoner." The White Doe is a long and ambitious work that concerns itself in part with the vast and spectacular action of a religious conflict twelve years into the reign of Elizabeth I. At the level of historical fiction it is successful, entertaining the reader with pomp and pageantry while reminding him of the somber and shameful realities of war. In many respects, the work is consciously traditional, taking as its central subject matter a historical event, as its stanza form the

41 PW, II, 501.
Spenserian, and embracing as its explicit values the institutionalized beliefs of Anglicanism. At its most serious level, the work explores a moral action, the crisis of conscience that befalls Emily and her brother Francis, Anglican members of the otherwise Catholic Norton clan, when their father engages in battle with the forces of Elizabeth. Francis follows his father and brothers, hoping that he may be of assistance to them without participating in the conflict. Emily, who at her father's command has stitched the banner under which the Nortons march, is left alone, and is the only member of the family to survive. She lives out her solitary existence attended only by a wild doe, Emily's attachment to which, it is hinted, is of mysteriously spiritual origin.

None of these elements in the work is sufficient to explain the prevailing attitude among the critics that the work is deeply flawed, a betrayal even of Wordsworth's powers, or evidence of the decline of those powers. No cause of artistic failure inheres in the historical or religious matter of the work, nor in the conscious archaism of its stanza form and its suggestions of the supernatural. Yet in spite of its strengths—and they are many, as we might expect of a mature and experienced artist—The White Doe is indeed a radically unsatisfactory poem, as the responsible judgment of many readers attests. While it is not customary to anatomize artistic failures,
the work is a noble failure, providing complex illustration of the principle that at the heart of all sound aesthetic form lies adequate technique; and it therefore bears examination. Whatever the weaknesses of *The White Doe* may tell us about Wordsworth's declining poetic powers, the causes for the poem's failure must be sought within its form.

The work is an imitation of an older kind of poetry, articulating institutionalized values in a consciously archaic form. But where the articulation of such values demands an unimpugnable, systematically authoritative narrator, Wordsworth instead structures the point of view in the mode of his earlier, "Romantic" narratives, creating another of those hybrid tellers whose access to information is omniscient, but who is also a partial witness possessing first-hand knowledge of significant elements in his tale, and inhabiting its setting. Kroeber rightly observes that in this work Wordsworth commits himself fully neither to the "role of allegorist" dramatizing fixed beliefs which his characters represent, nor to the task of telling a story which is "an end in itself ... flowing and developing in its movement." 43

42 In the Dedication to his wife, Wordsworth makes clear that the work is a deliberate evocation of Spenser, motivated by a nostalgia both for the joy *The Faerie Queen* has afforded them and for the moral stability that Spenser's poem assumes.

43 *Romantic Narrative Art*, p. 83.
This failure of focus is embodied in the point of view. The structure of the work is a story-within-a-story, the narrator represented as present only in the more immediate frame, where he tells of a rural Sunday service at some unspecified time later in the reign of Elizabeth than the main action, when a white doe visits the churchyard of Bolton Priory as the pious pray within the chapel which still stands at the heart of the ruins. As the congregation emerge after service, they speculate about the story behind the doe's mysterious devotion to the place. After summarizing their conflicting versions, the narrator dismisses these as "fancies wild" (I, 325) and prepares with the aid of his harp and the inspiration of a "Spirit" to provide "A tale of tears, a mortal story" (I. 336). Because of his dramatic position in the frame, his status as a witness, the narrator forfeits claim to the kind of godlike moral authority that earlier omniscient tellers could take for granted. And although Wordsworth fails to establish the narrator's authority by any other means, his relation of the story attaching to the doe nonetheless purports to be not one version among many, but the authentic and true account.

Though he lacks the authority of conventional omniscience, at the same time his dramatic status as a witness is not employed to show his vision and moral authority evolving in response to the material he narrates.
He is clearly present in and acquainted with only the place and personages of the frame, or, more precisely, his direct knowledge of these is confined to the time of the frame. His unimpeded access to the earlier events that concerned the Nortons is never accounted for.

Throughout the cantos that deal with the battle, this ambiguity in the narrator's status is untroubling. With the exception of scenes between the members of the Norton family, most of what he relates is of a relatively public character, and none of the events requires any extraordinary means of persuasion to be plausible. But in the final canto, which is concerned with the private and internal experiences of Emily in the solitary years after the defeat of her family, the narrator's lack of authority is grievously felt. The task which Wordsworth has set for himself, to persuade the reader that with the assistance of the doe Emily rises through earthly endurance to a state of beatific serenity, requires considerable rhetorical skill, a requirement for which the narrator is inadequate. Were he consistently an Editorial- or Neutral-Omniscient teller whose authority was beyond question, his summarized account and interpretation of her actions and feelings might be more readily acceptable. Were he developed as a witness, on the other hand, he might have served as a compelling spokesman for the values of the work, by himself dramatically attaining to acceptance of the high and
exact demands of spiritual resignation which Emily represents. In fact, however, we are told at some length that Emily achieved spiritual victory, but we are so told by a narrator whose authority is neither developed within, nor a given of, the work. Additionally, because Emily's triumph is largely summarized rather than dramatized, The White Doe is one of those works discussed by Booth which are "marred by an impression that the author has weighed his characters on dishonest scales." It is not that the narrator's judgment is in itself impossible to accept, but that it does not "seem defensible in light of the dramatized facts."\(^{44}\) If we examine the sparse facts of Emily's last days, she fails every bit as surely as Margaret fails, in The Excursion, Book I, to attend to the things of this life. She wanders about the countryside, revisiting Rylstone, the now abandoned and desolate seat of the Nortons. The single relationship with another living being that she sustains is with a dumb beast, the doe. What the work explicitly proposes as a victory is dramatized as what in humanistic terms is a defeat, or, in religious terms, is at best a withdrawal from the world, an attitude of resignation and contemptus mundi. While the narrator busily tries to persuade us that Emily has achieved a saintly serenity, the rhetoric of the work as a whole and of the final canto in particular, is

\(^{44}\)The Rhetoric of Fiction, p. 79.
inadequate in establishing that such serenity is either a possible or desirable psychological state.

External reasons do of course exist for the failure of *The White Doe* to rank among the greatest of Romantic narratives. Even if Wordsworth had constructed a consistently archaic work, it would remain an imitation of an inferior kind. The practice of classical imitation in the eighteenth century depended for its aesthetic vigor upon a congruity between the moral and poetic ideals of that time and the ideals—or what the eighteenth century imitators took to be the ideals—of classical antiquity. No such congruity exists between the values that *The White Doe* extols and the values of the period which produced it. Wordsworth's poem evokes defunct ideals without regenerating them or giving them new vitality and currency, without juxtaposing them with the ideals of nineteenth-century empirical humanism (to the formation of which his great poetry makes an inestimable contribution). The genius of Spenser, the purity of the early Anglican church, and the certainty of a life hereafter as the measure of all things are rather evoked as an exercise in nostalgia. The poem neither partakes of the particular vitality of its period nor speaks to that period. And it speaks to us as a pseudo-antiquarian object, beguiling and diverting, but ultimately lacking in poetic truth.

When we consider Wordsworth's narrative corpus as
a whole, however, we may fairly assert that his contribution to narrative innovation and his influence on the writers of his time are substantial. Wordsworth was the first, John Beer tells us, to take "the significance of man in solitude, cut off from the influences of society at large," as a central theme, to take individual man as the measure of the world he inhabits, and he embodies this perspective in narrative form by dramatizing the act of telling stories as an inward journey discovering the self. While the self-reflexivity of many of these poems represents an acute concern on Wordsworth's part with the purposes of art and of narrative, it also represents a broader concern to explore and articulate the mysterious relationship of man's mind to the world of the senses.

In a great many of the poems, the fictional world is presented from more than one vantage point, or from a vantage point that evolves in the course of narration, creating fluid and varying images of that world and dramatizing the individual consciousness as an essential element in its construction.

In his denial of systematic moral authority even to what are otherwise Editorial-Omniscient tellers,


Wordsworth places the burden of discovering value squarely upon the individual character, and by extension upon the reader. In this he presages the movement away from absolutely reliable omniscient narration, toward the representing of value as relative and achieved, not given; a movement whose reverberations are felt throughout nineteenth-century representation, and which finds vigorous expression in the theory and practice of twentieth-century fiction.

In other respects, Wordsworth's focus on the narrator's subjective contribution to the structure and values of his story neither originates entirely with him, nor is unique to him. Such a focus is after all an inevitable result of all forms of "I" narration, and it is a result exploited by as early a writer as Chaucer (whom Wordsworth admired and emulated). But "I" narration--whether "I" as Witness or Protagonist, or Editorial "I"--becomes the keynote of Romantic narrative because its emphasis permits the dramatization of value as subjectively wrought from the matter of the tale, and, by extrapolation, from the matter of life.
CHAPTER III

COLERIDGE

Coleridge's major narratives, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and "Christabel," were produced or begun during the late 1790's, when the friendship and collaboration between Wordsworth and Coleridge were at their peak and Lyrical Ballads was being planned and published. These poems and "The Three Graves"--also the product of that period and a work of closer collaboration than the others--share certain characteristic emphases with the narratives Wordsworth wrote at that time. They are narrated by dramatic personae given to unconscious self-revelation whose reports are not fully reliable. Although Coleridge usually provides a strong and suspenseful plot, the poems tend to reflect more the psychology of the teller and his relationship to the story than to represent the story world for its own sake. The relationship between perceivers and objects of perception in Coleridge's works is fraught with even more dangers and mysteries than it is in the works of Wordsworth. Coleridge's two major narratives contain not only story words which are irreducibly ambiguous, but narrators whose grasp of events and their
significance suggests the ultimate unknowableness of both outer and inner worlds. Coleridge's stories manipulate point of view not to imitate nature but to represent a self reacting to a represented world, to provide, in short, a text or version of experience.

Coleridge's commitment to narrative frames which reveal the teller and dramatize the act of telling is evident even in so slight an offering as "The Raven," composed in 1797. Years later, when the poem was included in the volume of 1817, Sibylline Leaves, Coleridge added a subtitle, identifying the story as "A Christmas Tale, Told by a Schoolboy to his Little Brothers and Sisters."¹ The subtitle forms an ironic counterpoint to the story itself, a brief but gruesome fable of impassive vengeance by nature. The essential point of view is Neutral Omniscience, and this has not been reworked to incorporate the fictitious schoolboy as a dramatic presence. While the addition remains an external rhetorical device, in a small way it shows the Coleridgean attitude to story by placing the account in a context of telling, supposing it the utterance of a persona, so that we are permitted to see it as one version of events, its telling an episode occurring at a given time, always subject to revision and reevaluation.

¹The Complete Poetical Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, ed. E. H. Coleridge (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1912), I, 171. All quotation of Coleridge's poetry is from this volume, hereafter cited as CPW, I.
In "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," however, this supposition, that the story is told by one character to another, while it functions rhetorically, is also a radical part of the poem's structure. Rhetorically, one effect of telling the story from the point of view of an "I"-as-Protagonist narrator is to aid in producing "a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith." 2 Much of the action of "The Ancient Mariner" is fanciful. But Coleridge has put the account in the mouth of the protagonist, whose understanding of events is realistically limited. We are asked in this work to accept extraordinary events, which reflect an extraordinary and finally inexplicably ordered universe; but we are asked to accept them only as the account of one man. Not the events in themselves, but what the Mariner has been able to make of them is the subject of the poem.

Since its first publication in the Lyrical Ballads of 1798, "The Ancient Mariner" has met with bewilderment, not to say downright hostility from readers and critics. 3 Later generations of critics have been more receptive, but

---

2 Coleridge, Biographia Literaria, John Shawcross, ed. (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1907), II, 6. Hereafter cited as BL.

the work has continued to produce a great variety of interpretations, many in opposition to one another, and even in opposition to the facts of the text itself. To my knowledge, only two commentators question the Mariner's authority. Lionel Stevenson treats the poem as dramatic monologue, focusing entirely on the mental state of the Mariner who, in response to an ordeal of extreme privation and isolation, "evolves a logical train of events to account for the occurrences, which would otherwise seem to be a cruel whim of fate." Stevenson thus disposes of the story as anything but the Mariner's construct. Raimonda Modiano, in an admirably argued essay, points out the ways in which the Mariner is forced to order his chaotic recollections in what she calls "the language of social discourse," to render them available to the conventional perceptions of his auditor, the Wedding Guest. The very act of telling becomes an act almost of misrepresentation, "shaping an otherwise formless, incomprehensible, and unbearable past into a structured narrative with a beginning, climax, ending--and a moral lesson as well." One major concern of the poem, in Modiano's view, is "the distance between private history

4 A review of the most significant disagreements is provided by Edward E. Bostetter, "The Nightmare World of 'The Ancient Mariner,'" Studies in Romanticism, 1 (1962), 241-54.

5 "'The Ancient Mariner' as a Dramatic Monologue," The Personalist, 30 (1949), 34-44.
and its narratives," between experience and subsequent accounts of it.  

While Stevenson's essay, by approaching the poem in a new way, draws attention to the psychology of the Mariner, I believe that he goes too far in asserting that the occurrences are illusory. Modiano's view is more moderate, suggesting that the version of his story that the Mariner tells is a distortion rather than a total fabric of delusion. The poem itself does not foreclose the possibility that the Mariner did, in (fictional) fact, confront manifestations of a supernatural order.

Coleridge's own comment that the poem's object was to consist in the interesting of the affections by the dramatic truth of such emotions, as would naturally accompany such situations, supposing them real. And real in this sense they have been to every human being who, from whatever source of delusion, has at any time believed himself under supernatural agency (BL, II, 5), appears superficially to support Stevenson's contention, emphasizing as it does the power of perceptual delusion and indicating plainly that Coleridge himself accords no literal belief to supernatural manifestations. But the text of the poem affords no unequivocal evidence that the Mariner is deluded; the Mariner's account is neither corrected nor corroborated by any reliable source of information. We can never know certainly what the Mariner is supposed to have

---

undergone nor whether his account is intended to depict true supernatural visitation or simple delusion. And this central ambiguity is deliberately created and sustained by the structure of point of view as I shall show.

The rhetorical devices of the poem underscore Coleridge's emphasis on the Mariner's recital as text. Since its publication in Sibylline Leaves, the poem has been preceded by an epigraph, a quotation from Burnet's Archaeologiae Philosophicae, which contains a broad hint, largely ignored by generations of readers, concerning the kind of belief we should accord the supernatural elements in the work. The passage expresses the belief that "there are more invisible things in the universe than visible," but admits the ultimate unknowableness of these invisible elements, for "The human mind has circled round this knowledge but never attained to it." The human mind has similarly circled the supernatural elements of Coleridge's poem, attaining no very satisfactory answers. The epigraph would seem to imply that no answers need be expected, but that instead we must content ourselves with "contemplating in the mind as in a picture, the image of a greater and a better world." (We may object, if we will, that the world of the poem cannot be proposed as "better" than our own world, but to so object is to insist again on interpreting what by definition resists rational inquiry.) The final sentence Coleridge quotes is a clear warning: "But mean-
while a watchful eye must be kept on truth, and proportion observed, that we may distinguish the certain from the uncertain, day from night." In the Mariner's story, we can distinguish between the certain and the uncertain only by attending to a central aspect of point of view: in which parts of the narration is the narrator reliable, in which unreliable?

The other rhetorical addition which Coleridge made in 1816, when he was revising the poem for *Sybilline Leaves*, is an eight-hundred word prose gloss. George Watson points out that the gloss is spoken not by Coleridge in his own person, but rather by a fictitious scholar whose language and beliefs identify him as a Jacobean neo-Platonist. Modiano sees the fictitious scholar committing errors in his reading of the text analogous to those errors which the Mariner commits as he attempts to order his tale. Where the Mariner's effort is to render a chaotic ordeal intelligible to the Wedding Guest, his auditor, the scholar's effort is to render the text, similarly unfamiliar and disorienting, intelligible to a putative reader. But like any persona, the gloss editor has only the limited authority of an individual, not the god-like authority of the omniscient author. His commentary is not definitive,

7 *Coleridge the Poet* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1966), pp. 89, 93.

8 "Words and 'Languageless' Meanings," pp. 44-46.
therefore, nor altogether reliable. Indeed, he seems at times to be aware of his limitations, as where he speculates concerning the nature of the Polar Spirit referring the reader to a learned source,

"one of the invisible inhabitants of this planet, neither departed souls nor angels; concerning whom the learned Jew, Josephus, and the Platonic Constantinopolitan, Michael Psellus, may be consulted" (CPW, I, 191).

In spite of his caution, however, the editor ultimately distorts the text, obscuring more than he clarifies. The Mariner's account is of a world whose events are at best primitively linked and whose inhabitants are invisible and incomprehensible agents of terrible suffering. The editor's reading of this account appeals to principles of cause and effect, to neo-Platonic philosophy, and to notions of justice and vengeance which he infers on hearsay or non-existent evidence from the Mariner's story. The very spirit upon which he expends his scholarly attention in the comment quoted above is described in the Mariner's account as the dream of the sailors (11. 131-32), a notoriously superstitious group of men. The editor even surpasses the Mariner in supplying a reassuringly Christian interpretation of events where he tells us "By grace of the holy Mother, the ancient Mariner is refreshed with rain" (CPW, I, 198). The Mariner himself merely expressed gratitude to "Mary Queen" that he fell asleep, but did not assume that Mary has caused the rain to fall specifically for him.
The gloss editor's version is no more logically defensible, given the facts of the text, than is the capricious interpretation which the sailors impose on events. At first they blame the Mariner, claiming that his killing of the Albatross has caused the calm: "all averred, / I had killed the bird / That made the breeze to blow" (ll. 93-94). But when the weather changes, so too their interpretation: "all averred, I had killed the bird / That brought fog and mist" (ll. 99-100). The editor is not capricious. He maintains from the start that killing the bird was a violation of hospitality, and that the trials of heat and thirst and equatorial calm are punishment for the act. But nothing in the action substantiates the causal connection that he makes. Indeed, in light of the arbitrary nature of events, the interpretations of the seamen appear more appropriate than the learned comments of the editor.

What then is the purpose of the gloss? It hardly constitutes an explanatory aid to the reader, obscuring as much as it clarifies. Is it not rather a tongue-in-cheek, dramatic representation of an educated, intelligent scholar responding too intellectually to an imaginative story? Watson finds that it works "to intensify the historical, dramatic, 'as-if' element in the poem . . . and deliberately to enlarge doubt concerning what the Mariner says." 9

9 Coleridge the Poet, p. 93.
It amounts, in effect, to a second fiction growing out of
the first and directing us, ironically, how not to read the
first, warning us not to impose upon it our own philoso-
phical predilections.

Within the poem proper, a further device exists to
underscore the dramatic and subjective nature of the
Mariner's tale. The story is framed by a Neutral-Omnis-
cient voice, which describes the meeting of the two
characters, Mariner and Wedding Guest, and summarizes the
Wedding Guest's response at the end of the story. In total,
this neutral voice speaks slightly less than twenty of the
625 lines that comprise the poem and supplies little in-
formation beyond what can be inferred from the conversation
between the two characters. The frame is important, then,
not for the information it imparts, but for the effect it
has on the story it encloses—again, a chiefly rhetorical
effect: it draws attention to the Mariner's tale as
recital, to the exchange between the characters as drama.
This omniscient, reliable report of the encounter is the
certain, the given, the "day" of the poem, within which
the Mariner's queer performance takes place.

For the rest, Coleridge exploits the limited
perspective of the "I"-as-Protagonist point of view to
create unresolvable ambiguity. One of the general
characteristics of this point of view, Friedman tells us,
is that "the protagonist-narrator . . . is limited almost
entirely to his own thoughts, feelings, and perceptions." But Coleridge goes a further step toward subjectivity, causing the protagonist-narrator to spend much of the voyage in a state of extreme physical privation, subjected to elemental torments so severe that they might well have caused him to hallucinate. On the other hand, his account, for example, of the phantom ship is concrete, lucid, visualized to the point that we cannot doubt he saw it. What we can and do doubt, however, is whether Coleridge represents it as existing outside the mind of the Mariner. Again, during one of the more mysterious sequences in the poem, the conversation between two voices which the Mariner overhears, he is "in a swound" (l. 392), and indicates clearly that he heard the voices before recovering:

\[
\text{ere my living life returned} \\
\text{I heard and in my soul discerned} \\
\text{Two voices in the air.}
\]

(11. 395-97)
The Mariner makes no attempt to define the nature or origin of these voices, apart from locating them ambiguously both in his soul and outside it. It is left to the gloss-editor to divert us with scholarly discussion of Daemons and Polar Spirits. The Mariner merely claims that he heard voices while in a deranged state of mind. Because he was in a trance, the existence of any voices outside his mind must remain subject to doubt.

10 "Point of View in Fiction," pp. 1175-76.
The matter of the alleged spirits' conversation can tell us something further about the Mariner's way of perceiving and interpreting his world. As the gloss-editor succinctly points out, the spirits are discussing the killing of the Albatross, for which, at the behest of the Polar Spirit, a long, hard penance has been imposed upon the Mariner. Though the Mariner assumes that the voices represent a reality outside his mind, the substance of what they say has been suggested earlier in the tale, in the interpretation of events put forward by the other sailors, and involves conceptions for which no objective evidence exists in the action of the story. Superstitiously reading the weather as having direct reference to themselves, the Mariner's shipmates construe the killing as a crime and punish the Mariner by hanging the dead bird about his neck. This is the only evidence in the poem that the killing of the bird and the subsequent ordeal in the equatorial doldrums are related as cause and effect, crime and punishment. The Mariner therefore has accepted an interpretation of events that he earlier gave no indication of having shared and relates it as fact to the Wedding Guest. Earlier, he has explained the mysterious passage of the ship upon a windless ocean by similar logic:

Under the keel nine fathom deep,
From the land of mist and snow,
The spirit slid: and it was he
That made the ship to go.

(ll. 377-80)
The only evidence prior to this that such a spirit even exists is that "some in dreams assured were / Of the Spirit that plagued us so" (ll. 131-32), but the Mariner eagerly grasps it and declares it as fact. When the same spirit is discussed by the disembodied voices, he is seen not only as the means by which the ship physically travels, but also as the instigator and prime mover of the penance. The whole question of the Mariner's guilt, and the attending questions concerning the existence and nature of the spirits who populate the story and bring the vessel home, have a primarily subjective bias, in that they originate in the minds of the sailors and in the Mariner's own mind. Whether they have reference to any reality or order of existence outside these subjectivities the poem does not say. All we are given is the Mariner's recollection of an ordeal in which external events and psychological response to those events have become inextricably bound together.

One incident provides particularly striking evidence that Coleridge deliberately left the world of the poem ambiguous. As the ship enters the harbor, the Mariner sees that upon the deck

Each corse lay flat, lifeless and flat,
And, by the holy rood!
A man all light, a seraph-man,
On every corse there stood.

This seraph-band, each waved his hand:
It was a heavenly sight!
They stood as signals to the land,
Each one a lovely light.

(ll. 488-95)
At this point, other witnesses—the Pilot, his son, and the Hermit—enter, providing Coleridge the opportunity of correcting or corroborating the Mariner's view of things. But their conversation, in which they exclaim over what they witness, neither corrects nor corroborates:

"Why, this is strange, I trow!
Where are those lights so many and fair
That signal made but now?"

"Strange, by my faith!" the Hermit said—
"And they answered not our cheer!
The planks look warped! and see those sails,
How thin they are and sere!"

Apparently they witness something out of the ordinary, but what it is precisely is not defined. The lights may be supernatural phenomena, or the effect of phosphorescence. Indeed, while the Mariner calls the ghostly lights a "seraph-band" and a "heavenly sight," the Pilot observes that the ship "hath a fiendish look." It is possible to argue, of course, that the dialogue of the Pilot and Hermit, as it is reported by the Mariner, is part of the same tissue of misconstruction which, in Stevenson's view, the Mariner has laid over his terrible ordeal. However, this part of the text does not invite such skepticism. The Mariner has re-entered the familiar world of the land and has recognized his native harbor and personal acquaintances. As his perception of these displays no distortion, we may take his report at face value. The fact too that the Pilot's vision of the ship differs so radically from
what the Mariner claims to have seen suggests that the Mariner is not elaborating a purely subjective version of events, "to account," as Stevenson says, "for the occurrences" on the ocean.\textsuperscript{11}

The illusion which the poem seeks is not of a world comparable to our own waking world, nor even, as Bostetter has claimed, of a nightmare world which represents or corresponds to anything in our experience. The poem provides not a glimpse into chaos, but the self-portrait of a man who has survived such a glimpse and returned burdened with a frightful vision which he is compelled to communicate. The precise nature of that chaos, whether it is the chaos of a human mind in extremity, or the manifestation of an unintelligible supernatural order, is left ambiguous for a rhetorical purpose. Coleridge did not expect his readers to take literally the supernatural machinery of his poem. But nor did he foreclose the possibility of belief, for that would have abrogated our sympathy with the Mariner's terrors. The present structure of point of view, with its inherent unresolved ambiguity, is designed to achieve precisely that "suspension of disbelief for the moment" which is adequate to the effect of the Mariner's tale.

In this ambiguity arising from manipulation of the "I"-as-Protagonist point of view, "The Ancient Mariner" is an example of what Richard Eastman has called the "open

\textsuperscript{11}"The Ancient Mariner' as a Dramatic Monologue," p. 41.
parable," for it "employs a central situation of high metaphoric power," but is "so constructed with certain opaque, irreducible details as to block the final verification of any one hypothesis." It shares in the chief strength of the genre, which Eastman describes as "specially able in its ghostly outlines to evoke the philosophical excitement which transforms all reading into an exploration of the human spirit."\(^{12}\) In its ambiguity it constitutes an imperfect articulation of the Mariner's ordeal, but it paradoxically testifies to the value even of imperfect articulation, to the power of narrative to free the teller temporarily from the solitude of terrible knowledge and to change the auditor permanently by permitting him a glimpse into a mind very unlike his own.

The concern of "The Ancient Mariner" with the mysterious nature of the external world and the power of discourse both to distort and enhance our experience remains of central interest in the narratives—all fragmentary—that come after "The Ancient Mariner." Two of these fragments, "The Ballad of the Dark Ladie" and "Love," Coleridge planned to combine into a single long poem, and indeed even published a version of "Love" in The Morning Post in 1799 under the title "Introduction to the Ballad of the Dark Ladie" (CPW, I, 330). He did not

---

complete this project, however, and "The Ballad" remained a fragmentary exercise in melancholy medievalism. "Love" is more interesting and complex, particularly in the form in which it was published in the Post, where the "I"-as-Protagonist narrator, a medieval poet, gathers and addresses an audience, among them the object of his love, Genevieve, and retells the story of his wooing her—a wooing achieved by the recital of a knight's disastrous love affair. Apart from the psychological interest that inheres in this curious courtship, suggesting a duality of motive on the part of the lover and of response on the part of the lady, the work testifies, like Othello's wooing of Desdemona, to the power of storytelling to move the auditor. Both "The Ballad" and "Love" are so fragmentary, however, that speculations about their formal significance remain tenuous.

"The Three Graves," although it too is a fragment, is more fully developed and embodies in its point of view a typically Coleridgean concern with versions of experience. We now know that Wordsworth wrote the first two parts of the poem in 1797. When Coleridge took up the task, then, of writing the second two parts, he began with an established narrative framework, where the story of a young couple, whose lives and that of their friend Ellen are

---

blighted by a curse from the bride's mother, comes to us through an "I"-as-Witness narrator, a country sexton, speaking to a stranger. Jonas Spatz has subjected the poem to Freudian exegesis, demonstrating that the events may yield an explanation very different than that provided by the witness-narrator. Spatz's interpretation, in effect another "text" of the events, points up the degree to which the sexton's version is the product of the simplicity and limitation of his mental faculties.

In an introductory preface to Parts III and IV, published in 1809, Coleridge claimed to see in the story "a striking proof of the effect on the imagination, from an idea violently and suddenly impressed on it." But "The language was intended to be dramatic; that is, suited to the narrator," and that language and narrator reflect not the sophisticated perception of their authors concerning human psychology, but the credulity and superstition of a country sexton. Coleridge uses the limited perceptual framework of his witness-narrator to explore the psychology

---

14 In Spatz's view, the mother's act of offering herself sexually to Edward, her daughter Mary's fiance, arouses already present sexual fears, Mary's that she will not function as an adult woman, Edward's that his desire for Mary is lust unenlightened by love. When the mother then curses their union, the curse "survives to blight their marriage and ultimately destroy them" ("The Mystery of Eros: Sexual Initiation in Coleridge's 'Christabel,'" PMLA, 90 [1974], 110).

15 CPW, I, 267-69.
of superstition, "the mode in which the mind is affected ... and the progress and symptoms of the morbid action on the fancy" (which he refers to in cases of witchcraft). The sexton himself is a dramatization of the superstitious mind which is a necessary condition of such action. He believes literally and reports uncritically the horrors which the characters endure. His credulity corroborates the credulity of the characters and draws the reader into partial credulity—again, a temporary suspension of disbelief—and thus into sympathy with the characters' plight. Yet the poem does not entrap the reader in the narrator's vision to the degree that "The Ancient Mariner" does. The Mariner's world is ultimately unknowable; the sexton's is more transparent, yielding to rational interpretation.

Where the sexton naively observes,

Beneath the foulest mother's curse
No child could ever thrive:
A mother is a mother still,
The holiest thing alive

(ll. 256-59),

to explain the anxiety felt by Mary on her wedding day, it is possible to adduce causes more probable than the direct efficacy of the curse, and impossible not to notice that the hackneyed conception of motherhood expressed by the sexton is inappropriate to the particular mother under consideration.

Although the action of the poem is firmly grounded in psychological probability, then, the sexton's inter-
pretation of that action hinges upon a naive and literal belief in the supernatural power of malediction. Consequently, we are not fully drawn into the sexton's vision. In that portion of the poem written by Wordsworth,\textsuperscript{16} in particular the concluding lines to Part II, the sexton begins to reveal himself in a manner like that of the old sea-captain who narrates "The Thorn." As he relays the rumors of uncanny events that attach to the graves, his credulous nature and garrulity usurp the line of the narrative. As Coleridge developed the tale, however, the emphasis is less on the narrator's unconscious self-revelation that it is on the disparity between the sexton's version of events and the probable psychological causes of those events. In this respect, "The Three Graves" resembles "The Ancient Mariner." Like the Mariner, the sexton imposes too narrow a perspective upon his story that both obscure probable causes and heightens the horrors that the characters endure.

Where these narrators dramatize the ways in which language and fixed modes of articulation vie with (and may defeat) the multeity of experience, the narrator of "Christabel," although he embarks on his narrative protected by a body of conventional belief, develops differently, and in confronting the irrationality of the events he relates is obliged to abandon the assumptions with

\textsuperscript{16}Reproduced as Coleridge's in CPW, I, 269-75.
which he initially approached his subject. Although the mysterious figure of Geraldine has captured a certain amount of critical attention, I believe Michael Holstein is correct in focusing on the characters' responses to her, rather than on her nature in itself. But the larger question is how the narrator—himself responsive to and even captivated by Geraldine—understands the others' responses to her. Apart from Geraldine, the end of the fragment, "The Conclusion to Part II," has provoked critical bewilderment and dissatisfaction. But if we attend to the narrator's function as a dramatic and developing presence in the work, the problem of the ending is greatly diminished, since it becomes part of a dramatic and affective process, the narrator's final response to events.

The story as such is—obviously enough—"about" Christabel. Part I relates her initiation into knowledge of evil in all its ambiguity. Part II relates the social consequences of that knowledge, where it is brought into a context of custom and law to which it is antithetic.

---

17 For example, see Elizabeth Chadwick, "Coleridge's Headlong Horseman: Insinuating the Supernatural," The Wordsworth Circle, 8, (1977), 47-55; Spatz, op. cit., p. 111.


19 See Watson, Coleridge the Poet, p. 106; and Constance Hunting, "Another Look at 'The Conclusion to Part II' of Christabel," English Language Notes, 12 (1974-75), 171-76.
But a concurrent action unfolds, implicit in the telling, as the narrator confronts, and resists confronting, the events he relates. He too is initiated into a deeper perception of the anarchy of human impulses than his initial naive rationalism would permit. He resists the perception in itself, but his most prolonged and painful resistance is to admitting the corruption of innocence and recognizing that the "lovely lady Christabel" should have her purity alloyed with baser impulses.

Kark Kroebber has claimed that the narrator of "Christabel" has no distinct character.\textsuperscript{20} While it is true that he is endowed with little in the way of personal qualities, does not refer extensively to himself, and is invisible to the other characters, he does nonetheless reveal himself as he tells his tale, exhibiting habits of mind and unconscious preferences and prejudices which render his task difficult. Yet he is a particularly difficult narrator to abstract from the tale he tells, or to view as a character. Stevenson remarks that before the wide use of the conventions of dramatic monologue in the latter half of the nineteenth century, it was a common practice to identify the speakers as dramatic by placing their utterances in a dramatic situation or context\textsuperscript{21}--as Coleridge did with his Mariner, and as Wordsworth with so

\textsuperscript{20}Romantic Narrative Art, p. 64.

\textsuperscript{21}"The Ancient Mariner as a Dramatic Monologue," p. 34.
many of his speakers in the *Lyrical Ballads*. No clue is
provided in "Christabel" that the narrator's utterance is
dramatic, or that his perspective will shift and develop.
Indeed, the way that Coleridge handles point of view
throughout is deceptive and prevents our immediately per-
ceiving the narrator's subjective bias.

If we attempt to define in Friedman's terms the
point of view from which the story is told, we run at once
into difficulties. Though the categories Friedman has set
up are broad enough, one might think, to include most means
of transmission, the narrator of "Christabel" does not fit
perfectly into any one of them. He combines characteris-
tics of Editorial-Omniscient and "I"-as-Witness narrating--
and some of these combined characteristics are inconsistent
with one another--yet he lacks characteristics of both
modes.

Like all omniscient narrators, he is capable of
providing inside views on the contents of his characters' minds, chiefly, but not exclusively, the mind of Christabel.

When she is praying in the wood, for example, he can tell us what has motivated her:

> She had dreams all yesternight
> Of her own betrothed knight;
> And she in the midnight wood will pray
> For the weal of her lover that's far away.

(11. 27-30)

When she cannot sleep, he explains:

> But through her brain of weal and woe
So many thoughts moved to and fro, 
That vain it were her lids to close; 

Toward the end of Part II, he can provide the cause of Sir Leoline's rage:

His heart was cleft with pain and rage,
His cheeks they quivered, his eyes were wild,
Dishonoured thus in his old age

Along with inside views, the narrator can provide other kinds of privileged information, in that he reports events which nobody was present to witness—Christabel's solitary vigil in the wood and her meeting with Geraldine, for example—all the events of Part I, indeed, where nobody other than Christabel and Geraldine was present. This free access to information is a normal result of omniscient narrating, where "the story may be seen from any or all angles at will," and nothing is necessarily hidden from the narrating mind.

Yet the narrator here lacks some information about his story and characters, and thus cannot be said to be fully omniscient. When Christabel first hears a moaning in the wood, the narrator appears to be ignorant of its source until Christabel herself finds it out. He asks at first, "Is it the wind that moaneth bleak?" (l. 44), but concludes that there is not enough wind. When Christabel goes around the tree to investigate, he asks, "What sees she there?"

---

22Friedman, p. 1171.
His questions may of course be purely rhetorical, or intended to represent the uncertainty of Christabel's own response, yet they can point to his being something other or less than omniscient. Again, his knowledge of the quarrel between Sir Leoline and Lord Tryermaine is limited. After generalizing on the topics of youthful vanity and human inconstancy, he deduces what destroyed their youthful friendship--"And thus it chanced, as I divine, / With Roland and Sir Leoline" (ll. 414-15) -- but he has no certain, specific information. Finally, analyzing Sir Leoline's rage against Christabel, he speculates on how Sir Leoline might be affected by tender recollections of his dead wife:

Within the Baron's heart and brain
If thoughts, like these, had any share
They only swelled his rage and pain.

(ll. 636-38)

Only then does he go on to provide an inside view of what Sir Leoline was thinking and feeling.

Though he is not limited to what an observer might realistically know, in some respects he does function as a witness-narrator. Other than limitation of access to information, important features of this narrative frame are absent, however. Friedman defines the witness-narrator as "a character in his own right within the story itself, more or less involved in the action, more or less acquainted with its chief personages, who speaks to the reader in the first person." In the story he tells, the narrator of

23"Point of View in Fiction," p. 1174.
"Christabel" is not in any sense a character, being invisible to the other characters and having no effect on the action, his involvement in which is limited to an intense and immediate response. Yet he creates nonetheless the impression of being a member of the society he is describing and of having some acquaintance with the other members. At the opening of the poem, for example, he describes the midnight scene in present tense, as though it were before him. Moreover, he depends almost entirely upon scenic presentation to relate his story, increasing the sense that he is present, an eye-witness to the events. Summary, the trademark of the omniscient story-teller and of the story-teller whose sources are legend or hearsay, but not direct observation, is rare in the poem.

But these are subtleties which, though they are suggestive, do not plainly or conclusively distinguish this narrator from conventional Editorial-Omniscient narrators. There remains one large characteristic of his behavior, however, that does so distinguish him: he is not a fully reliable medium of information. Although his predominant mode of narrating is scene, like a conventional Editorial-Omniscient narrator he comments upon the action, speculating and interpreting. But because his frame of reference for what is going forward is too narrow, his commentary is inadequate, and at times outright misleading. And it is through this fundamental structural ambiguity that Coleridge
focuses attention on the narrator as character—not a character in the story of Christabel, but as unwitting protagonist in his own drama of shifting perspective on the events he tells. For the structure of point of view undermines verisimilitude in the narrated story. Again, as so frequent in Coleridge's narratives, the realism is psychological.

The narrator's manner of telling at the beginning provides a clue to how his expectations and personality obscure events. He is given to a question-and-answer form, suggestive of rationalistic mental processes, for purposes of exposition. Initially, while he deals with material that is familiar and congenial to him, his method goes along smoothly. He questions the weather, for instance, and supplies a perfectly acceptable answer (ll. 14-15). He queries Christabel's presence in the dark wood, and reassuringly explains it by her piety: "she in the midnight wood will pray" (l. 29). But the orderly sequence of question and certain answer begins to disintegrate with the incursion of Geraldine, the alien intruder, upon the scene. The narrator responds with puzzlement to the sound of her moaning: "Is it the wind that moaneth bleak?" (l. 44), and can at first provide only a negative answer which he expands upon for eight lines, interrupting the progress of the narrative and avoiding the problem at hand. He is more reluctant than Christabel, who goes at once to look, to confront the
unfamiliar and threatening. When the dog growls at the passing of Christabel and Geraldine, a little later, the narrator again questions: "what can ail the mastiff bitch?" (l. 149), and this time arrives at no answer at all except to speculate misleadingly, "Perhaps it is the owlet's scritch", before repeating the question. From the information he provides we can infer well enough the source of the dog's disquiet, and of the embers' leaping suddenly in "a fit of flame" a few lines later. The lower orders of existence, the animal and the elemental, respond to the presence of Geraldine in an immediate way that the narrator in his rationalism cannot.

As Geraldine begins to exhibit undeniably demonic behavior, the narrator's manner of rational enquiry breaks down completely. He utters a string of unanswerable questions:

Alas! what ails poor Geraldine?
Why stares she with unsettled eye?
Can she the bodiless dead espy?
And why with hollow voice cries she . . .

(11. 207-10)

He has no frame of reference through which to understand or explain her behavior. And in spite of his commitment to rational procedure, the narrator is characterized by a compulsion to admit to consideration only those things which accord with his prior mental constructs. Paradoxically, his avoidances, his refusals and failures to confront what he is relating, his prevarications and evasions, while they
obscure and confuse the action, sharply emphasize its horror. Simply as a device for telling a Gothic tale he is admirably designed. His privilege permits him to witness what he could otherwise not tell; his squeamishness permits him to hint at horrors without stating them.

There is, however, more to "Christabel" than the "poem of Gothic terror" that Watson finds it to be. Though the narrator's prejudices and naivete are barriers to his presenting fully and coherently the action of Christabel's initiation into the knowledge of evil, he involuntarily provides instead the action of his own initiation into that knowledge. He refuses to confront the evidence of Geraldine's duality until it is inescapable. When Christabel conducts Geraldine into the castle, for instance, the narrator twice pronounces them both "free from danger, free from fear" (135, 143). He has himself been charmed by Geraldine's beauty so that he no longer recalls his initial dim awareness of her danger—although that awareness itself served to make her appear the more beautiful to him:

I guess, 'twas frightful there to see
A lady so richly clad as she—
Beautiful exceedingly!

(11. 66-68)

Her beauty and his own obstinate rationalism conspire to blind him to her destructive power. Even in the second part of the poem, after the revelation of her terrible

24 Coleridge the Poet, p. 114.
deformity to Christabel, the narrator continues to describe her effect upon Sir Leoline in terms that suggest he himself is still dazzled by her. But the prime cause of his blindness, his ruling passion, is a sympathetic and protective emotion toward Christabel. Before he knows what is in the wood, he invokes heaven's protection for her: "Jesu, Maria, shield her well!" (l. 54). At the moment of Geraldine's revelation, he interposes his own shocked response between the reader and the scene he is describing:

   Behold! her bosom and half her side--
   A sight to dream of, not to tell!
   O shield her! shield sweet Christabel!

(11. 252-54)

He cannot protect Christabel, of course, and the irony is that she has to endure the horror of touching what he cannot even bring himself to articulate. But he continues to cry out against her contamination throughout the second half of the poem, futilely, since it is already an accomplished fact. In his zeal to protect Christabel and to deny the implications of what he has related he would even revise events:

   And Christabel awoke and spied
   The same who lay down by her side--
   O rather say, the same whom she
   Raised up beneath the old oak tree!

(11. 370-73)

He is carried away on the tide of his own rhetoric:

   Nay, fairer yet! and yet more fair!
   For she belike hath drunken deep
   Of all the blessedness of sleep!

(11. 374-76)
Ironically, Christabel, on whose account he has reconstructed events, cannot herself ignore the consciousness of evil:

"Sure I have sinn'd!" said Christabel, "Now heaven be praised if all be well!"

(11. 381-82)

But gradually he comes to recognize the inescapable, that Christabel's innocence is irrevocably altered, that she has undergone a vision of evil and deformity that cannot be obliterated. And he cries out not in pleas to heaven, but in an infinitely sad lament for the loss of innocence, framed as a parenthetical aside, as if he does not recognize as quite legitimate the individual cry of a human heart unsupported by religious or intellectual tradition:

(Ah, woe is me! Was it for thee, Thou gentle maid! such sights to see?)

(11. 455-56)

And at the last, he states without evasion what has happened:

The maid, devoid of guile and sin, I know not how, in fearful wise, So deeply had she drunken in That look, those shrunken serpent eyes, That all her features were resigned To this sole image in her mind.

(11. 599-604)

Well before the narrator comes to recognize the implications of his story, in the opening passages of Part II, Coleridge has given the reader's recognition an assist in the person of Bracy the Bard, who responds to the world of the poem at this point and to Geraldine later in a manner indirect and orphic, penetrating the surface of things. Bracy is a believer in unknown forces and their power to affect human
life. If his vision is somewhat primitive and superstitious, it is more comprehensive than the rational piety of the narrator, and recognizes the evil inherent in the world of the poem. As a poet, he contemplates and articulates symbolically what conventional systems of belief exclude. In these ways, Bracy is the "true" poet, the more accurate narrator, alerting us that the version of events we are given suffers from the limited perspective of the teller.

Having once recognized the irrevocable change in Christabel, the narrator struggles with its effects on her relations to those around her. The final event of the poem as Coleridge left it is Sir Leoline's refusal to hear Christabel's plea that Geraldine be sent away. The narrator contests the attitude taken by Sir Leoline, who has permitted himself to be blinded, as had the narrator, by Geraldine's beauty to the danger she represents, and who responds to her, again as the narrator himself did, out of a traditional system of belief, or code, that is not adequate to understanding her. Where the narrator's set response was one of piety, rationalism, and a misplaced chivalric desire to protect Christabel, Sir Leoline's derives from what Holstein has called a "decayed chivalric tradition powerless against the incursion of new forces,"25 the chivalry of his youth--another form of the "custom and law" with which he orders his world. The narrator

opposes this empty and simple-minded chivalry not with the empty and simple-minded sensibility with which he has confronted so many of the events of the story, but on grounds of natural ties, of human love and loyalty. He is deeply changed from what he was at the beginning of the poem. Here he addresses what is alterable in the human condition: rather than praying for Christabel's deliverance from unnamed evil, he appeals to her father's loyalty and paternal love not to abandon her.

When we compare the Conclusion of Part I with that of Part II, the change in the narrator emerges strikingly. Both passages are his reflections on what has gone before, and both attempt to interpret events. But the first is marked by evasion and wishful-thinking. He begins by reconstructing a nostalgic vision of Christabel before her acquaintance with Geraldine, praying in the wood. He represents this "lovely sight" as a kind of purely aesthetic vignette in which Christabel appears iconic—"a youthful hermitess / Beauteous in a wilderness" he calls her later. Of the scene in the wood, this is all that he reconstructs, omitting by the operation of selective memory the events that have disturbed Christabel's innocence. As he turns to the scene before him, he cannot reconcile that vision of calm innocence with the disquieting sight of Christabel lying in Geraldine's embrace. He exclaims: "O sorrow and shame!" and would deny the
evidence of his senses: "Can this be she, / The lady, who knelt at the old oak tree?" (ll. 296-97). Although he recognizes Geraldine's power, granting her claim of an hour, "one hour was thine-- / Thou's had thy will!" (ll. 305-06), he cannot grant the effect of this upon Christabel. Observing her restlessness, he explains it away illogically, in terms that move from hypothesis to unfounded declaration:

And, if she move unquietly,
Perchance, 'tis but the blood so free
Comes back and tingles in her feet.
No doubt, she hath a vision sweet.
What if her guardian spirit 'twere,
What if she knew her mother near?
But this she knows, in joys and woes,
That saints will aid if men will call:
For the blue sky bends over all!

(ll. 323-31)

The events of the story do not support this affirmation of simple piety. Like the ancient Mariner, the narrator would believe in a simple and transparent moral order, and construes what he tells in accordance with that belief.

By the Conclusion to Part II, the narrator has been led to recognize, painfully and reluctantly, the duality of evil, the corruption of innocence, and the perversion of human love and loyalty in Sir Leoline's rejection of Christabel. In the Conclusion, he leaves his characters and story to reflect on the paradoxes of human love generally, in lines that constitute a lyric cry, the culmination of his own dramatic response to the events. Though it has been suggested that the lines are spoken
by Coleridge in his own person, I can see no necessity for this multiplying of narrating voices. Granted, the language of the Conclusion does not share the literary archaism that characterizes much of the body of the poem, and the diction here is simple to the point of childishness. But it is dramatically appropriate to show the narrator struggling with incipient perception and reduced to primitive articulation.

What he has come to see is that love can turn to hatred, that the human heart finds tenderness beyond a certain point insupportable, until the lover

Must needs express his love's excess
In words of unmeant bitterness.

(11. 664-65)

What shocks him still more is the reflection that love itself may originate as a reaction against the "wild word" spoken in anger, that good may depend in effect upon accidents of evil, that the deepest ecstasy of love may even, "in a world of sin," as he speculates in a tone of horror, originate chiefly in "rage and pain," and so customarily be expressed in harsh words.

The sense of the lines is neither so clear or unequivocal as my paraphrase of them may imply. Indeed they are obscure almost to a fault, but their very obscurity is used to dramatic purpose, to show the mind of

the narrator turning in upon itself, struggling with an anguished and unwilling perception of the impurity of human motives in a fallen world. Although I do not agree with their claims that this is Coleridge speaking directly to the reader, both Bostetter and Holstein give serious attention to the final lines and supply sound readings in general agreement with one another. Bostetter views the Conclusion to Part II as Coleridge's "baffled acknowledge-
ment that the sources of evil are inherent, not extraneous," and finds the poem "in a sense an 'interior' drama, the projection into Gothic trappings of psychological states." 27 Holstein suggests that "in the 'Conclusion' Coleridge addresses himself not to events in the poem but to the crucial psychological problem that the entire poem explores--how best to react to the sudden realization of the inextricable combination of malignancy and vitality in experience." 28 I differ with these views only so far as to assert that it is the narrator who stumbles across the difficult per-
ception, and that the final lines are of a piece with the whole drama of his response, a drama which has led him to a mode of understanding that attempts, in however tortured and obscure a fashion, to reconcile the opposites that he earlier evaded or denied.

27 The Romantic Ventriloquists, p. 130.
The narrator of "Christabel" constitutes a highly unconventional combination of conventional modes of narration, of freedom with limitation, of omniscience with unreliability, and in himself forms a kind of reconciliation of opposites. Coleridge's narratives generally make high demands on the reader's powers of inference because of the kinds of limitation of point of view that they employ. As in many of Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads*, the narrators of "The Ancient Mariner" and "Christabel" are eccentric to the point that they mislead the reader, trapping him in the imaginative and perceptual limitations which it is the true business of these stories to explore.

Late in his career, in 1828, Coleridge composed a last brief narrative poem which is atypical in its use of a fully reliable, Neutral-Omniscient narrator. "Alice du Clos" is a minor masterpiece in its kind, and does not suffer by comparison with the works composed earlier. Yet it indicates by contrast how, in the problematic and less perfectly lucid poems, a great gain in suggestive power and a deep formal cohesion were achieved through the use of limitation and unreliability. One theme in "Alice" is again "the disparity between discourse and experience," between a version of events and events in themselves. The poem is even subtitled "The Forked Tongue," but here it is not the narrator whose tongue is forked or whose version

29 Modiano, p. 44.
of events is less than fully reliable. He is master of both factual event and distorted report. He assures us that Alice is "spotless fair," reports her innocent activities with her page, and quotes her words to Sir Hugh. He then reports Sir Hugh's later damming and distorted account of her actions and twisting of her words to Lord Julian, Alice's lover, whose jealous rage causes him to kill her. Coleridge makes masterly use of Neutral Omniscience, of the capacities the technique affords to provide a wide range of information, to present states of mind, to move from one vantage point to another, and to characterize summarily and concisely, so that the poem achieves a concentrated and intense effect, full of dramatic irony, as the characters rush towards their destinies not knowing what the narrator knows.

But Neutral Omniscience is less useful in achieving effects which are more typically Romantic. In his discussion of the uses of authorial silence—those modes of narrating which deny the author any direct voice in the proceedings—Wayne Booth observes:

By the kind of silence he maintains, by the manner in which he leaves his characters to work out their own destinies or tell their own stories, the author can achieve effects which would be difficult or impossible if he allowed himself or a reliable spokesman to speak directly and authoritatively to us.30

One of these effects is that relative and shifting perspec-

tive which is the source of much fertile ambiguity in the other poems. Although "Alice" is in part concerned with the disparity between discourse and empirical reality—Alice, like Desdemona, is destroyed by the false report of an evil tongue—the use of Neutral Omniscience militates against the formal realization of this as a theme, by speaking to us of the uncertainty of language and morals through a medium which is itself certain and fixed. I suspect that for all its seamless unity and polished perfection, "Alice" has not found a place among the most read and loved of Romantic narratives because it is not in any sense an open parable, lacking the opacity and suggestive power that other narratives of the period have taught us to expect.

Coleridge's distinctive use of unreliable "I"—as—Protagonist and Editorial "I" narrators in "The Ancient Mariner" and "Christabel" is the source of the "educative" power of both these works. Both are so constructed that, in suspending disbelief, the reader is ensnared in the narrator's vision before he is alerted to its inadequacies. Thus the works demand from the reader not an aesthetic detachment, but an experiential commitment that permits his vision to be transformed. In this high demand, the two poems participate in and carry forward the express purpose of the Lyrical Ballads to reform and refine the taste of their readers.
CHAPTER IV

BYRON

The sensibility which informs the poetry of Byron is very different from that which is shared in some degree by the poetry of Wordsworth and Coleridge. For the earlier poets, Harold Bloom observes, "The world of actuality ... afforded no existing conceptions fully acceptable to the imagination"; as a consequence they remade their world. On the other hand, Byron "never left the world, nor could he abandon any of the existing conceptions of it," thus his is "the most social of Romantic imaginations and so the least Romantic."¹ Instead of remaking the world, Byron's imagination pits itself against all that he sees as destructive, all that curbs and bows the human spirit. In this sense he represents in a major way one kind of Romanticism. In an age of poetry distinguished by iconoclasm, he is perhaps the most iconoclastic. Showing us individuals making usually fatal accommodations, he questions whether we can adapt our nature to life without destroying what is most valuable in us. At the core of

Byron's work, as in the earlier Romantics, is a concern with modes of survival in the post-Enlightenment world, a world no longer perceived as answering to human aspirations.\(^2\)

In the process of finding adequate means of transmission for his vision, Byron continues in his own way to remake story, to construct an order of narrative that reflects the turbulence, moral ambiguity, and inconclusiveness of life itself. But it is only in his final work, *Don Juan*, that he creates a true "lyrical ballad," one of those works that break out of the boundaries of both lyric and narrative genres to become a new synthesis. The early group of Oriental tales reflect for the most part artistic conservatism, depending on conventional means of transmission, primarily the Neutral Omniscient frame, the mismanagement of which, I shall argue, is responsible in great degree for their limited artistic success.

I. The Oriental Tales

Among these early poems, *The Giaour*\(^3\) alone is thoroughly Romantic for its point of view embodies the mingling of consciousness and event, of subjective and


objective. In spite of its artistic weaknesses, the work is a striking experiment, in which objective story line is almost completely submerged by a fragmented, impressionistic manner of telling. The poem as Byron left it, after adding many extensive passages to it over the course of several months and seven editions in 1813, relates obliquely the disastrous love of a "Giaour" (an infidel, in the Islamic view) for a harem favorite, Leila, whose master, Hassan, has her drowned for her unfaithfulness. With a band of followers, the Giaour subsequently ambushes Hassan and kills him in revenge, then spends the rest of his life in a monastery deeply remorseful that his love should have caused Leila's death. The story is introduced by a narrator whose point of view is unclear, and told by a Turkish fisherman, with a great deal of commentary, which, in its penetration and breadth of perspective, is out of character for a simple fisherman, yet in other instances, in its expression of identification with the Turk, Hassan, and with the faith of Islam, is inconsistent with the character and opinions of the speaker who introduces the story. Two narrators are present but it is frequently impossible to distinguish between them. A similar confusion of speakers arises in the dialogue of the fisherman with a monk in the monastery where the Giaour in later years retired.

Aware perhaps that the work confronted the reader
with unresolved ambiguities and obscurities, Byron added this note:

The story in the text is one told of a young Venetian many years ago, and now nearly forgotten. I heard it by accident recited by one of the coffee-house storytellers who abound in the Levant, and sing or recite their narratives. The additions and interpolations of the translator will be easily distinguished from the rest, by the want of Eastern imagery.4

Jerome McGann suggests that the difficulties in continuity and coherence are obviated if we conceive of the whole as the "performance" of such a story-teller, who, in this view, is assuming the roles of all the speakers, fisherman, monk, and Giaour, as well as those of minor characters. "What Byron intends us to apprehend in the poem," McGann says, "is its narrated quality."5 If indeed this is the effect Byron aims for, I do not think he achieves it through the device that his note suggests. No evidence exists within the poem that a Levantine storyteller is doing the narrating. Even with the external aid of Byron's note, the reader is unusually taxed to infer the presence of such a persona since, apart from what clearly pertains to the fisherman, the narrator is not realized as a distinctive character. Moreover, the fisherman is inconsistent and lacks verisimilitude. The "storyteller's" failure to project himself

---


convincingly into the character of the fisherman is, after all, Byron's failure.

While Byron's tinkering with the poem did not succeed in resolving its problems, I do not agree with W. H. Marshall that the additions were generally deleterious, causing "the diffusion of the structure and ... growing inconsistency in the characters of both the fisherman and the Giaour." Marshall assumes that the whole poem, with the exception of the Giaour's confession, is the utterance of the fisherman. But the persona who in the introduction laments the oppression of Greece under Turkish rule is not consistent with the staunch Turkish Moslem who eulogises the fallen Hassan and curses the Giaour to an eternity of vampirism for his infidel act, to cite but one differentiation between the narrators.

I believe that Byron's intention in adding to the work was not, as Marshall dismissively puts it, "merely ... to expand the body of a short poem and to give both a full setting and a moral direction to a dramatic incident," but to develop a structure and significance for which he found his original narrator (the fisherman) inadequate. For convenience, we may violate the chronology of Byron's composition to divide the additions into two categories,

those which expand or interrupt the fisherman's account (largely in the first half of the poem), and those which provide the Giaour's confession (occupying most of the second half). Much of the inconsistency in the character of the fisherman, though it may be aggravated by the additions to his account, is present from the very beginning, in the MS version of the work. This version, which amounts to less than one-third of the total length of the work in the seventh edition, might conceivably issue from a single point of view, that of the fisherman, but even here his role is stretched beyond the bounds of plausibility. Those lines which initially introduced the story, the first six with their allusion to the tomb of Themistocles and the heroic past of Greece, and a brief passage describing the evasive tactics of a fisherman frightened of pirates (ll. 168-79 in the seventh edition), either constitute a framing point of view, that of a neutral, reliable commentator, or oblige us to view the fisherman as being possessed of comprehensive, artful, and detached powers of mind which he does not consistently exhibit. The additions to the fisherman's account suggest that Byron found the

---

8 I have avoided calling this commentator by Friedman's term, Neutral Omniscient. His privilege does not extend to "inside views" of characters' minds. His relationship to the story-material is largely undefined. But in commenting on general but related themes, and responding to the tale itself, he provides a larger frame of reference for the work.
original framework of point of view too confining, excluding all reflection and commentary other than what the ignorant Moslem fisherman can supply *ex parte*. Even in the first edition, which Marshall defends as being dramatically effective, two passages of generalized commentary which are improbable as the utterance of the fisherman have been added (on the pain of love, ll. 916-36; and the pain of solitude, ll. 937-70).

The additions in fact frequently increase the confusion and inconsistency in the work, straining our belief in the fisherman's character, particularly in those lines added to the third edition where the fisherman comments at length on the aspect presented by the Giaour in flight (ll. 200-50; 253-76 in the seventh edition). However, the additions do succeed in creating around the limited vision of the fisherman a second perspective, a layer of detached and general commentary of profound rhetorical power. While the source of this commentary and its relationship to the rest of the structure are inadequately articulated—Byron's note concerning the story-teller amounts to an acknowledgement of this—the commentary itself broadens the significance of the events of the story, placing them against a historical background of aggression and of the repeated and universal failure of human dreams and aspirations.

The additions to the latter half of the poem
constitute an extended first-person confession by the
Giaour to one of the friars. In the original version, the
Giaour's voice is heard only very briefly addressing his
confessor at the end of the poem. With the expansion of
this speech into a monologue (accomplished in large part
in the first edition, but added to in every subsequent
dition except the sixth), Byron essentially introduces
another point of view, the Giaour's own. The story is
more or less retold from his vantage point, with, as we
might expect, very different emphases than those lent by
the fisherman's personality. Where the fisherman's vision
was fragmentary and elusive, the Giaour's confession de-
tails an inner life that is fixed and obsessive. He
presents the claustrophobic picture of a man caught be-
tween passions. All the vitality of his personality
centers about the events of the past, leaving the present
a barren emptiness from which the only exit is death. In
its terrible egocentricity, the confession forms an impli-
cit contrast to the comprehensive intelligence that intro-
duces the work with a meditation on the great disappoint-
ments of humanity. But it is also complementary to that
general view of human failures, suggesting their source in
the inmost core of men's souls.

For all its artistic problems, then, The Giaour
achieves a number of important effects. Its disrupted
chronology denies conventional reader expectations, to
reorder narrative in terms not of temporal sequence, as beginning, middle, and end, but of perception—an order which is atemporal, fragmentary, and inconclusive. Its multiple narrators, although they give rise to the chief problems in the work, also serve this large aim. Their testimony and vision constitute different versions of and responses to a single set of events. The structure as a whole moves from the general perceptions of the reliable commentator and the partisan judgment of the fisherman, to the internal, highly particularized and personal experience of the Giaour.

In the tales which followed The Giaour between 1813 and 1815, The Bride of Abydos, The Corsair, Lara, and The Siege of Corinth, Byron attempted no radical experiments in reordering narrative structure or reader expectation. These poems provide evidence that Byron's forte as a storyteller, like Wordsworth's, lay in self-expressive or dramatic narrative and that his narrative genius found its most unimpeded expression in Editorial Omniscience, where he might dramatize himself fairly freely, or in "I"-as-Witness or "I"-as-Protagonist frames, where a fictive character became his voice. The freedom of Neutral Omniscience in Byron's hand usually produced stories whose moral implications are uncertain, whose characters are often not wholly

---

9BPW, III.
convincing or interesting, and not sympathetic, stories often betraying the importunate voice of the author.

The protagonists in these tales are all in some degree morally flawed, but lack tragic stature in their corruption. In spite of the freedom of Neutral Omniscience, permitting the author all of the devices for showing and telling, and granting him the power—"the most important single privilege" a narrator can have, in Booth's view\(^\text{10}\)—of providing inside views of characters' minds, Byron does not fully exploit these freedoms. He cannot command for his corrupted heroes either sympathy or our acceptance of the gloomy, exotic world they inhabit. This stricture applies in some measure to all four of the tales in question, but especially to Lara and The Siege of Corinth. The two earlier poems, The Bride and The Corsair, are more successful, in part because Byron makes effective use of dramatic techniques of representation, not by constructing a dramatized narrator, but by exploiting scene rather than summary to create characters and events.

Indeed, if The Bride of Abydos founders aesthetically, it is largely because of mismanagement of the point of view. The characters are stock types—Giaffir, the old villain who plans to marry off his daughter for political advantage; Zuleika, the daughter, a pure and

\(^{10}\)The Rhetoric of Fiction, p. 160.
ravishing young beauty; and Selim, Giaffir's supposed son and Zuleika's supposed half-brother, a youthful rebel who is not what he appears to be. Selim has discovered that he is Giaffir's nephew, and that his real father was killed by Giaffir. Although he has lived a life of confinement, Selim has nonetheless become the leader of a group of pirates, with whose aid he plots to escape with Zuleika from Giaffir. In the act of flight, however, he is killed by Giaffir's troops, and Zuleika dies instantly of a broken heart. But in spite of this generally improbable plot and the lack of depth in characterization, the work contains convincing and moving moments. The timid, obedient Zuleika expresses her loyalty to Selim with a surprising intensity in her willingness to defy her father (ll. 310-16). Selim himself appears sympathetic and believable in his description to Zuleika of his confined life and his intoxicated response to freedom.

The poem's best moments are presented as "scene," where the characters appear at a specific time, interacting with one another and speaking for themselves. Still, Byron appears not to trust entirely to such dramatic effects; while the authorial commentary throughout the work is sparing, parts of it cast a false coloring over the events themselves as for example the hyperbolic and irrelevant description of Zuleika's physical beauty (ll. 158-92), or the grandiloquent, pseudo-heroic under-
lining of Selim's response to the girl's declaration of loyalty and love (ll. 327-46). These commentaries are designed to secure our sympathy for the character and to heighten the emotional pitch of the incident, but in fact they detract from more valuable effects—in the first case from Zuleika's dramatically rendered and convincing moral qualities, in the second from Selim's own passionately articulate response.

Overall, the narrator's function in The Bride of Abydos is one of mere embellishment, his commentary obviated by the dramatic and scenic progress of the action. The narrator is superfluous, fulfilling none of those functions which demand authorial reliability. He does not possess an intelligence superior to that of the characters, nor does he articulate their thoughts and feelings any better than they themselves can.

A similar lack of economy vitiates others of the tales which are told from the Neutral-Omniscient point of view. Even The Corsair, one of the strongest of this early group, does not altogether avoid the pitfalls that his chosen point of view presented for Byron. A simple, dramatic story is accompanied by commentary that at times deepens the significance and emotional resonance of the action, but at other times attempts to wrest morals and meanings out of thin air, to impose on the characters and events significancies which they will not bear.
Like the other Oriental tales, *The Corsair* tells of violent deeds resulting in desolation. Conrad, the Corsair of the title, forsakes his beloved Medora, to attack the palace of the Pacha Seyd, but is defeated when he and his followers leave the fighting to rescue the women from the burning harem. Most of his band are killed, but he himself is rescued by the harem queen, Gulnare, who kills the Pacha to secure Conrad's freedom. He returns with her to the pirates' island, where he finds that Medora has died of grief.

The simple story poses a number of complex moral questions, but these tend to be overshadowed by authorial commentary. The summary history of Conrad's character, for example, is inadequate, reducing to simple moral absolutes the complexity, both moral and emotional, that we see dramatized in the action. There is something puerile in the notion that Conrad's originally noble nature has been "Warped by the world in Disappointment's school" (I, 253), and that he has managed to make no subsequent adjustments. We are told that Conrad is depraved in every respect except one—the perfect love he bears Medora. But we are shown a character who registers a wide range of attractive human qualities—loyalty to and responsibility for his followers, compassion for the helpless women in the burning harem, revulsion at Gulnare's incurring the guilt of murder on his behalf, and courage, skill, and intelligence in his
renegade calling. Byron would have done better to let the moral implications of Conrad's character and behavior attend to themselves, rather than providing us with moralistic explanation. Even the pirate band have more interest and humanity than the authorial label "guilty" would indicate. Their song, with which the poem opens, expresses an amoral vitality, a belief in their own freedom from the usual cares and restrictions of life. Again, in a little scene depicting the landing of one of the pirate ships (I, 83-116), what is emphasized is the human response to the men's homecoming, and not the illicit or violent nature of their occupation. In short, while we are told that Conrad leads the "guilty," himself "guilt's worst instrument" (I, 250), we are shown a group of outlaws whose mode of survival in a lawless land makes such judgment appear dismissive, excessively simple.

In other respects, however, The Corsair admirably exploits the opportunities of Neutral Omniscience. The narrative pace of the work, its blending of drama and description, of action with commentary, scene with summary, is managed in such a way that much of the authorial "in­trusion" is functional and apposite. Before providing the summary history of Conrad's character, Byron capitalizes on the flexible vantage point of the omniscient narrator to describe Conrad as he is seen by his men (I, 61-82), establishing an image of him as austere, solitary and
forbidding—an image that in its own way suggests more about his character than the later expository summary does. In the presentation of scene, moral implications are suggested through imagery and diction rather than through explicit moralizing. As Conrad leaves Medora, for instance, his moral distance from her and from the gentle domestic virtues that she offers is represented by his physical progress toward the pirate ship and the gradual absorption of his mind in marine matters, to the point that "he mans himself and turns away," suppressing thoughts of her (I, 505-606). During the attack on the Pacha's place, Conrad appears to the moslems "some Afrit sprite, / Whose demon death-blow left no hope for fight" (II, 150-51); and later, to his own men when they find him inside the palace slaughtering all around him, "A glutted tiger mangling in his lair" (II, 191). Without preaching or moralizing, Byron has laid bare the destructive viciousness of the combative code to which his protagonist subscribes.

These are instances of summary and commentary which are relatively dramatic, arising from the perceptions of the characters or from events themselves. The poem also contains one striking instance of purely authorial commentary, which can issue only from the detached intelligence of the narrator, but provides an index of the rhetorical power that omniscience and the freedom to comment at will confer. When the attack on Seyd's court fails, and Conrad
is thrown into prison to await torture, instead of attempting to represent the turmoil of his mind directly or dramatically, Byron permits himself a general reflection on the state of mind which is characterized by the sense of failure, remorse and despair (II, 236-65). Although the whole passage is undisguised authorial intrusion, it is convincing as an approximate representation of what Conrad must feel. In the state of confusion that the passage describes, Conrad is incapable of articulation but the narrator achieves an eloquence both analytical and moving.

The female characters in the work, on the other hand, are entirely dramatic constructs, in that they act and speak for themselves and are not interpreted or explicated by the omniscient narrator. Although the primary function of each is to cast light on Conrad, Medora by representing the humane and civilized values that form one pole of Conrad's conflict, Gulnare by being the protagonist of a kind of sub-plot analogous to Conrad's moral deterioration, in which with the best of motives--mercy and love--she is led to incur the guilt of murder, the dramatic method of presentation endows each of them with a life of her own. Medora especially might have been a mere bundle of abstractions had Byron chosen to construct her primarily through summary and commentary. Instead, she is presented in the long scene of Conrad's leavetaking, where she proffers comfort and art and love to detain him. Byron does dispose
of her summarily once her function is fulfilled, taking few
pains to render her death significant or convincing in it-
self. Her death is a purely symbolic event, representing
the defeat in Conrad's history of the values she embodies,
communicated to the reader through his discovery of it.

Gulnare, in contrast, is a highly developed charac-
ter who threatens in her dramatic complexity to steal the
spotlight from Conrad. Where the perversion of Conrad's
virtue in the past is presented summarily by the narrator,
couched in a rhetoric and placed at a distance that diminish
sympathy for him, Gulnare's corruption is shown to proceed
from a most defensible anger at her enslavement by Seyd
(who is drawn both by Gulnare and by the reliable narrator
as a sybaritic tyrant), and from her desire to spare
Conrad, who has saved her from dying in the burning palace,
the ugly death by impalement that is in store for him.
Although the effect of her character is dependent in large
degree upon her immediate dramatic force, her stature is
not simply a matter of her being rendered by one method
rather than another. More than a gain in technical power
on the part of Byron, who provides ample evidence prior
to this that he could construct vivid dramatic characters,
Gulnare bespeaks a gain in maturity and richness of con-
ception. The expression of these is of course facilitated
by technical skills, but these skills were already in
her author's repertoire.
Although *The Bride* and *The Corsair* employ the Neutral-Omniscient point of view, whose chief strength is the freedom to comment, the artistic vitality they possess is less the result of authorial commentary than of dramatic means of representation. In each work, moreover, a different kind of dramatic narration occurs momentarily, an authorial, self-dramatizing digression, in which the author or story-teller speaks in his own person, referring to his function as teller, evoking old heroic stories of Greece, and responding to the present, despoiled Greece which is the scene of his story. While these passages are not sustained or integral enough to undermine the otherwise Neutral-Omniscient point of view, and their contribution to the total effect of each work is correspondingly slight, they are nonetheless important. Because they are placed before the crisis in each work (in *The Bride*, at the opening of Canto II, in *The Corsair*, that of Canto III), and because they express a lyric yearning for the heroic past, they operate to intensify the suspense and the emotional significance of the actions that are to come. In this sense, they create rhetorically powerful local effects. From the historical vantage point, however, they

---

11 One might argue that the crisis of *The Corsair* is the defeat of Conrad's band. In terms of "the gross and visible action" of the work, this is so indeed. But in terms of the moral action, Gulnare's killing of Seyd is the crisis, the nadir of both Gulnare's and Conrad's moral dissolution.
constitute instances of Byron's impulse toward self-dramatization and lyric expression, presaging the mode of Don Juan, and evidencing the subtle presence of what I would argue are specifically Romantic narrative procedures among the other, more conventional procedures of the works.

Of the early narratives, Lara and The Siege of Corinth are the least satisfactory. But in these tales too, the impulse to dramatize the narrator makes itself fleetingly felt through the overall structure of Neutral-Omniscient narrating. The opening passages of Lara, as Robert Gleckner has remarked, suggest a dramatic involvement on the part of the narrator with the protagonist, where the narrator hopefully speculates, for instance, that the recently returned Lara may have changed for the better during his travels, and that the sins of his youth "Might be redeem'd" (I, 57-64). Though the narrator never emerges fully as a dramatic entity, either as a witness within the frame of the action, or as an editorial "I", at this early stage in the work he creates the impression of participating in the speculative and uncertain reaction to Lara's presence that he ascribes to the retainers. As the action unfolds, and Lara's mysterious vendetta with the neighboring knight, Sir Ezzelin, explodes into a large-scale peasant uprising instigated by Lara, this sense of the narrator's direct participation in events is not sustained. From the point at which he provides privileged, summary analysis of
Lara's character, in fact (I, 115-26), he is placed outside the frame of the action and does not subsequently emerge either as a witness or as an editorial, dramatic presence.

Had the dramatic status of the narrator been developed and sustained, we might, as Gleckner says, have had "an absorbing account of the growing disillusionment of the narrator with the values of his world,"\(^\text{12}\) among other possibilities that a witness-narrator presents. But Byron has essentially provided himself with two sets of possibilities, two points of view from which to narrate, "I"-as-Witness and Neutral Omniscience, neither of which is exploited consistently and to full effect. The result is, as Gleckner says, that the narrator "stumbles into confusion and inconsistency." If Byron intended primarily to dramatize the reaction which Lara's presence provokes in those around him—fear, speculation, suspicion, curiosity, all of which make up the response of the peasants and nobles of his world—surely a witness-narrator, himself an inhabitant of that world, would provide the likeliest means. The possible range of response such a witness might provide is very broad. If, on the other hand, the work proposes as its chief object the study of an alienated soul in conflict with itself and with its fellow beings, a fully authoritative, Neutral-Omniscient narrator, exercising

\(^{12}\text{12\ Byron and the Ruins of Paradise (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1967), p. 157.}\)
privilege judiciously, would seem the obvious choice. This is almost, but not quite, what we have in the poem. G. Wilson Knight believes the work is chiefly "a psychological study," but if it is, Byron has certainly been perverse in structuring its point of view to preclude access to the psyche of the protagonist.

While the narrator does provide inside views of Lara's mind, and reliable commentary which often includes privileged information, his access to other information is arbitrarily limited so that at crucial moments he knows no more than any ordinary observer might. He does not know, for example, how Lara spent the years of his absence. He knows neither the source of Lara's mental anguish, confining himself (and the reader) to the hints and guesses of the servants, nor the substance of Sir Ezzelin's insult to Lara. He is not privy to what passes between Lara and his page, Kaled, because they speak in a foreign language. When Sir Ezzelin vanishes mysteriously, the narrator provides only a peasant's account of having seen an unidentified horseman drop an unidentified body into the river. Even his access to Lara's mind is arbitrarily limited, precisely where we might expect the exercise of privilege. When Lara walks from his garden into his ancestral hall,

where he is confronted by an unspecified apparition, the shift from representing his thoughts and impressions to representing the flurry his scream raises among the servants (I, 181-210) is deftly executed, but its effect is mystification. Why may we not know what terrors haunt Lara in the night? The narrator's ignorance in all the instances cited produces mystification, but mystification of a trivial sort, not in the service of a more profound or abstruse truth. The one mystery which is resolved in the course of the action, Kaled's puzzling demeanor and inexplicable attachment to Lara, which are clarified by her exposure as a woman, constitutes a pointless exercise in imposture. What can Byron expect us to infer from this disclosure? What difference can it make to the story as it has unfolded up to this point? What are we to infer from the imposture in the first place? The whole incident appears a shoddy attempt to introduce a frisson of sexual excitement into an otherwise glum narrative. Perhaps Byron had a more serious end in view, but whatever it was, it remains unfathomable.

Although the overall effect of the work is disjointed, central to the character of Lara as it has been drawn are the qualities of isolation, aloofness, and private anguish. If this impenetrability is central to the work as a whole, Byron had no need of the Neutral Omniscience frame. A well-constructed witness-narrator
might have provided as much insight into the protagonist as is provided by the present Neutral-Omniscient point of view, and could further have provided justification for all the mystery which surrounds the story. Indeed, many of the best parts of the poem concern the responses of others to Lara--his retainers' optimism at his homecoming, their concern at his evident mental distress, and suspicion of some terrible secret weighing him down, the fascinated chill that follows his angry exit from Sir Otho's social gathering, the judgment and gossip that break out after his savage attack on Sir Otho. These are rendered powerfully and convincingly, but they entail no more privilege and no more latitude in point of view than is proper to a witness. Byron is betrayed not by his choice of point of view, but by a fundamental failure to decide what effects he seeks in the work. And Neutral Omniscience offers him little assistance in shaping that fundamental purpose.

Like Lara, The Siege of Corinth lacks thematic definition, and for some of the same causes. It presents the destruction of the city of Corinth as a result of the conflict of two men, Alp, a renegade Venetian, and Minotti, the Venetian governor. Both characters are one-dimensional in their evil, Alp's attack being motivated by revenge for an old wrong, Minotti's final destruction of the city and sacrifice of its inhabitants by selfish pride, the incapacity to admit defeat. The only dramatic embodiment
of any more salutary values than these two represent is Minotti's dead daughter, Francesca, who appears as a ghost; however, her ghostliness and her failure to shake even for an instant Alp's intention of destroying the city the next day make her less than believable as a character and ineffective as a dramatic force. The most impressive passages in the work are descriptions of the destruction wrought by war, descriptions that at times dwell on repugnant physical horrors to the point of sensationalism. In short, nothing in the dramatic structure of the work contrasts with the rapacity of its two main characters, and little in its rhetoric provides the means of making moral distinctions. In contains only a small amount of reliable commentary, and that lacks dramatic force, coming from a Neutral-Omniscient teller. The portrait of the Virgin before which Minotti crosses himself near the end suggests the salvific power of divine love; but this symbolic import is overturned by dramatic ironies—the Virgin "smiles, / Though slaughter streams along her aisles," and Minotti's act of piety is immediately followed by his act of destruction.

Byron may have been aware that the poem lacked balance, or a context that would render its horror meaningful since to the second edition he added a passage of forty-five lines in which the narrator speaks of his insouciant youthful adventures with a band of comrades, mercenaries of some stripe, we may infer. That time is now
past, the comrades dead or scattered, but recollections of it sustain the persona and demand utterance:

My thoughts, like swallows, skim the main,
And bear my spirit back again
Over the earth, and through the air,
A wild bird and a wanderer.
'Tis this that ever wakes my strain,
And oft, too oft, implores again
The few who may endure my lay,
To follow me so far away.

(11. 36-45)

The speaker promises to evoke a lost innocence, or to relate its loss. But what follows has nothing to do with that promise. The persona of the introductory lines is apparently concerned with his personal history, but in the rest of the poem no attempt is made to incorporate such personal history into the events at Corinth, which are related as before from a Neutral-Omniscient point of view, and not from the point of view of any distinctive dramatic or fictional character.

While the artistic weakness of both *Lara* and *The Siege of Corinth* is attributable in part to Byron's not making the most of the opportunities of Neutral Omniscience, this failure is interesting in itself. It suggests a dissatisfaction on Byron's part with the limitations of conventional narrative forms, impelling him to combine them, in this way defying their boundaries, in an attempt to fabricate new and complex modes of narration. That his attempt fails is not evidence either of incapacity or carelessness in managing the Neutral Omniscient point of
view. In other works, he deploys the arsenal of the Neutral-Omniscient teller to authentic effect, in The Corsair, for example, as we have seen, and he wrote at least one work in this mode which is quite successful structurally, Parisina. Particularly in Lara, there appears something careful and deliberate, albeit perverse, in the mingling of point of view, indicating that we are watching a poet for whom both subject matter and technique are still elusive and refractory.

Although Parisina does not exhibit any typically Romantic traits in its narrative procedures, it is worth examining briefly if only because it is the first of the narratives to suggest the development of Byron's poetic art. I do not mean by this to retract my earlier assertion that Byron's story-telling genius is specifically Romantic, as we shall see when we examine Don Juan. But in Parisina he moves toward a more dramatic method of representation, using Neutral Omniscience to explore the mental states of the characters rather than depending as in the earlier works on general commentary and sensational action. He constructs an essentially tragic situation, in which Parisina and Hugo's illicit love calls forth a punishment that is radically disproportionate—death for Hugo, and death or a lifetime of solitary grief for Parisina. The work exposes with dramatic force and conviction the terrible

14 BPW, III, 505-28.
consequences of uncontained passion, of both the guilty love of Parisina and the angry severity of her wronged husband, Azo.

Instead of explaining the characters' moral nature and motivation, as in *The Corsair* and *Lara*, for example, Byron presents their mental states dramatically, as they arise from events, using a variety of devices. To characterize the love of Parisina and Hugo, Byron provides a rapid description of a meeting between them, employing brief inside views of their enraptured emotional state and equally brief general comments on the encompassing power of passion in such moments. Although Byron minces no words about their culpability, the effect of the scene is not primarily to condemn them, but to create a vivid impression of their frailty and humanity (because their inner life is compellingly rendered). More remarkable for Byron is the humanizing of Azo by the direct presentation of his rage and pain when he discovers the faithlessness of his wife and his bastard son, Hugo. Instead of the one-dimensional tyranny or villany that characterized earlier, analogous guardians of the status quo--Giaffir in *The Bride*, Seyd in *The Corsair*--Azo, although he shows no mercy to Parisina and Hugo, exhibits a complex emotional response, registering love, grief, jealousy and rage in rapid succession at the moment of discovering Parisina's infidelity, dread as his knowledge is confirmed, and grief in the long
aftermath of his vengeance. He emerges as more than a cardboard tyrant largely because Byron represents his mind although not exclusively for that cause. Indeed, Azo's most moving moment is one in which we are not told precisely what he is thinking or feeling—we infer that as he sentences his son to death he is overcome by strong emotion, represented by the physical gesture of covering his face with a shaking hand (ll. 223-29).

In general, as the action moves from the private realm of the characters' passions to the public events of judgment in the state chamber and the execution of Hugo outside the palace, Byron depends less on entering their minds and more on other methods of representation. The dramatic method of earlier tales, in which characters' responses to an event are expressed directly in their own speech and actions, and a shifting vantage point through which we frequently see events and behavior as they appear to others present are employed along with brief representations of characters' thoughts. Parisina's feelings as Hugo is sentenced are represented in the glassy-eyed appearance that she presents to the spectators, and in the distorted sounds that issue from her when she attempts to speak, and reported in an authorial glimpse into her overwrought mind that shows "her thoughts all wild and wide--
/ The past a blank, the future black" (ll. 363-64). As Hugo is executed, the spectators have an almost choric
function, responding first with subdued terror to his be-
heading, then with compassion to the shriek of despair from
the grief-stricken Parisina in the palace:

... those who heard it, as it pass'd,
In mercy wished it were the last.

(11. 500-01)

Although the Neutral-Omniscient frame did not
usually conduce in Byron's hand to well-controlled narrative,
Parisina succeeds in exhibiting the interactions of a group
of characters in the grip of strong emotion. It is also
more economical than the earlier tales, managing its effects
in less than half the length of most of them. It spite of
the enormous popularity of the earlier tales in their time
(the sale in one day of ten thousand copies of The Corsair
is the most striking instance of the avidity with which the
reading public received Byron's stories), in spite also of
the great vitality these works exhibit, had Byron produced
nothing further we would not on these grounds place him in
the foremost rank of Romantic poets.

In the years spanning the production of the Oriental
tales, Byron worked upon his autobiographical poem, Childe
Harold's Pilgrimage. Properly speaking, Childe Harold is
not a narrative, or is at least not a fictional narrative
of the kind with which this study has been primarily con-
cerned. McGann places it "somewhere between narrative and
drama," and calls it "the poet's tale of himself" in which
he undergoes a succession of psychic changes in the course
of four cantos."15 Yet the two early cantos suggest Byron's plan to produce a more or less objective, fictional narrative. His failure to do so exhibits with peculiar clarity the dilemma of the Romantic poet for whom "objective" and "subjective" were no longer as easily distinguishable as they had been for the classical poet.16 The work proclaims itself as a quest, "A Romaunt," in its subtitle, but as an imitation of an older kind of story, it largely inverts convention as it proceeds. Canto I presents Harold as the protagonist and promises an account of his adventures as he travels across Europe seeking solace for his deadened and alienated soul. In the early stages, Harold is clearly separate from the Editorial-Omniscient narrator, who interposes himself very early between story and reader, obscuring Harold completely and responding himself to the scenes which Harold is purportedly seeing. At the opening of the first canto, Harold is characterized and his past summarized; he is placed aboard ship where he utters a lyric, "Adieu, adieu! my native shore," and the ship is moved along to Portugal which, beginning in stanza xv, becomes the subject of an extended reflection—the narrator's reflection on the landscape of Portugal, its history of strife and oppression, ending with a bitter denunciation of the Convention of Cintra. These responses are perfunctorily attributed to

15 Fiery Dust, pp. 32-33.
16 See Langbaum, The Poetry of Experience, p. 35.
Harold, but after twelve stanzas in which we have the sense that the thoughts and feelings do not issue from Harold, that they are in no way revealing of his character, and that the insights and emotional conflicts that they dramatize are not the products of his outlook, the attribution, "So deem'd the Childæ," appears an unconvincing afterthought. Throughout the first two cantos, the narrator repeatedly abandons or ignores Harold as his subject. Instead he responds, laments, upbraids, mocks, meditates, and mechanically attributes his responses to Harold, who has the air of a puppet, a device. Indeed, Harold's appearances are sparse. He never emerges as a believable fictional character into whose trials we may enter.

In short, viewed as fictional narrative, the first two cantos are a failure. But the attempt to objectify emotion in the person of Harold and its subsequent abandonment are instructive, suggesting a need in Byron, as in Wordsworth, to use narrative as a vehicle for subjective, lyric impulses, to represent the fusion of imagination with the empirical world of events. The objective figure of Harold fails in part because Byron lacked the necessary detachment to realize the character convincingly, but even more because Byron's true subject in the work is himself, and Harold is an excrescence, an unnecessary impediment to expression of that subject. In the two final cantos, after Harold has been exposed as the fiction he has all
along patently been (see III, iii), we see him as Byron's attempt at emotional camouflage, an "object-self" McGann calls him, constructed to protect the poet from recognizing the Harold-like despair in his own heart. At this level—as the author's persona in an essentially confessional work—Harold may be viewed as an integral part of the poem. But in the early cantos, the poem masquerades as Harold's story, and not surprisingly has been read by a great number of readers as a kind of travelogue in which Harold is a pretext, a device for moving the poem across Europe on a sight-seeing tour.

One might argue that the structure of the work inverts one more convention of traditional narrative by arousing certain expectations which it then refuses to satisfy, providing a different kind of literature than we initially take it to be. I believe, however, that Byron surrendered his fictional approach not as a deliberate act of artistic defiance, but rather because he could not sustain it and because it failed to serve him in the way that he required, submitting in the final cantos to writing his story in another, more frankly subjective fashion. Throughout the first two cantos, we have the sense that Harold and his moods and meanderings are extraneous to the real action, the poet's inward journey to wrestle with the contradictions in his own nature. Europe, Nature, art,

Napoleonic, history, literature—all of these are represented not for their inherent interest but because of what they can reflect about the poet's state. The first two cantos show a profound uncertainty in their attempt to mask the subjective origin of Byron's responses to the world.

II. Mazeppa and Don Juan

By 1816, the works upon which Byron's reputation as a major poet rests had begun to appear. In this year the third Canto of Childe Harold's Pilgrimage was composed, and over the next few years Byron wrote more narratives, his dramas, and Don Juan. Concurrently with the first Canto of Don Juan, he also composed Mazeppa, which is unique among his narratives in using the "I"-as-Protagonist point of view. The Neutral Omniscience of the Oriental Tales may well have been a flight from the pitfalls of unas-similated personal expression. But the "I"-as-Protagonist point of view helps to resolve the problem, permitting Byron to project himself onto an objective fictional narrator.

Mazeppa's first-person account of his adventures is framed by a Neutral-Omniscient account of the circumstances under which the tale is told. This frame-story serves to dramatize significant aspects of Mazeppa's

18 Text of Mazeppa, BPW, IV, 207-33. Byron's other uses of the "I"-as-Protagonist frame are dramatic mono-logues rather than narratives, e.g., The Prisoner Of Chillon.
character which in turn illuminate the implications of the story he tells. The setting is a forest in which the wounded Charles of Sweden, accompanied by a handful of survivors, takes refuge for the night in his flight from the battle of Pultowa. Among these survivors, in this fearsome situation, Mazeppa alone remains "calm and bold" (l. 56); the rest are, to a man, "sad and mute" (l. 49), clustered around the king. Mazeppa busies himself attending to the needs of his horse, accepting those necessities which life imposes on humans and animals alike. In the details of Mazeppa's preparation for the night, Byron creates a vivid impression of the moral qualities of the man, not only of his practicality and self-reliance, but also of his generosity in sharing food with the king and the other men. His storytelling is a modest and self-deprecatory gesture of submission to the king's wishes, free of any hint of self-importance, egotism, or compulsion. The Neutral-Omniscient frame-story suggests the character in a very brief space, establishing Mazeppa's simplicity and strength and the social nature of his storytelling, an act which becomes part of a continuum of practical and intelligent adaptation to the contingencies of the moment.

In its depiction of Charles of Sweden, the frame-story also produces some incidental satire whose effect is reinforced by Mazeppa's occasional direct addresses to the
king during the story. But Charles's character functions primarily as a foil to Mazeppa. Charles's kind of self-mastery is a monomania, all of his passions subsumed by one great one, the unbridled lust for power, his very physical agonies subordinated to monarchial pride, "His pangs the vassals of his will" (l. 42). In contrast, Mazeppa has learned to subdue his will to the exigencies of the situation.

Mazeppa relates that as a young man he was tied to a wild horse and sent galloping across the plains as punishment for the indulgence of illicit passion. Unable to master anything in his environment during the harrowing three-day ride, Mazeppa learns to master himself, to curb his will and to forego struggling against his bonds since all struggle exacerbates the horse's fear and rage and Mazeppa's own physical agony. The character which emerges from this story is constructed partly from what he tells and partly from the tone and language of his telling. In spite of the lesson in self-mastery learned through his ordeal, Mazeppa still harbors the passions of the past. Initially, he is very much the seasoned veteran, looking with ironic indulgence on the follies of youth as he relates his early life as a page in the urbane court of Casimir. The tone of this description is marked by wit and detachment. But as he relates his love for the young countess, Theresa, we see him moved again to emotion, and
he is bitterly sardonic when he recalls the surprise occasioned by his return years later to take revenge on the count:

They little thought . . .
. . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
That one day I should come again,
With twice five thousand horse, to thank
The Count for his uncourteous ride.

(11. 407-12)

Theresa is still loved, then, and the count who punished him unforgiven, although Mazeppa has had his revenge.

As McGann remarks, however, Byron does not judge Mazeppa harshly for the act of revenge. The poem manipulates the "I"-as-Protagonist point of view to emphasize Mazeppa's subjective state, eliciting sympathy for rather than judgment of him. Far from appearing bloodthirsty, Mazeppa's character emerges both from the frame-story and from his own account as a balance of self-protective and generous qualities. In its emphasis on Mazeppa's mind, the poem recalls Wordsworth's ideal of story, where revolutions of the spirit are preeminent over gross and visible action. Mazeppa does, to be sure, contain its share of gross and visible action. But the wild ride on horseback is more than a fast-paced, exciting, frightening event; although it possesses these qualities, it is chiefly significant for having conditioned the character of Mazeppa

19Fiery Dust, p. 184.
as this emerges through the whole structure of the work.

Of all Byron's narratives, his last, *Don Juan*, is the most Romantic in the sense that the word applies to the narratives of Wordsworth and Coleridge. Through a hybrid point of view that mingles limited moral authority with omniscient access to information, the work dramatizes the engagement of the poet's volatile and inclusive consciousness with the business of storytelling. I have alluded earlier in this chapter to the self-dramatizing element in Byron's poetry. At the risk of belaboring the point, I would distinguish "the poet's consciousness" as it is represented within the confines of his art from his consciousness as it may exhibit itself elsewhere, in his personal papers, for example, or as it is reconstructed by his biographers. A cult of personality has long impeded Byron criticism and diminished his art. The Editorial-Omniscient narrator of *Don Juan* may most profitably be taken as a persona rather than as the author speaking in his own voice.

Through this persona, the work goes further than any of the Romantic narratives I have examined or that has come to my attention in representing and exploring the

---

20 BPW, VI.

21 George Ridenour finds, for example, that "critics overcome by the poet's own well-publicized personality have evidently considered the notion of a persona quite irrelevant to Byron (*The Style of Don Juan* [New Haven, 1960], p. 16).
relationship between teller and tale, in focusing on the act of narration, and in dramatizing the submissions and refusals of the art of composition. Hazlitt's perspicacious description of Don Juan as "a poem about itself" remains valid. While the poem concerns itself in great part with the fortunes of Juan, it also concerns itself with the activity and progress of its fictionalized creator.

This dual focus is present from the start, in the opening sentence, "I want a hero," in which the persona both predicates a need within himself and defines a central structural element of the work: its concept of heroism is an evolving and unsystematic one. The poem represents the persona's own quest for heroism or for a redefinition of heroism, in which context the adventures and discoveries of Juan serve as a kind of test case. In a sense, of course, two quests are going forward throughout the poem; Juan's quest for survival or happiness in the world of Love, War, Tempest and Travel, and the persona's quest in the world of art, mind, feeling and memory--indeed, in what appears an unlimited spectrum of human experience. Yet both quests ultimately are one. Juan is frankly a device, a literary construct, created partly from common materials: "We have all seen him, in the pantomime, / Sent to the devil

somewhat ere his time" (I, i), and partly out of the need of the persona for a hero, a need which will modify the pantomime conception of Juan, and construct a character through whom are explored various modes of heroism, or, more precisely, modes of humanity, much of the action and character in the work being unheroic.

The unifying consciousness of the narrator in the work has been widely recognized but not widely examined. Elizabeth Boyd unwittingly puts her finger on the problem of the narrator's relationship to the whole when she describes the work as "a skillful dramatic monologue" and later as something which "must be judged as a novel, on its merits as a story." In the second context, "the first-person digressions re-enforce and explain the story, but even without the digressions they story stands firm," according to Boyd. The problem is this: if we view the work as primarily a dramatic monologue, what is the function of the Juan story? Alternatively, if we view it as a novel or story, what is the function of the digressions? It will not do to say merely that they "re-enforce and explain the story." Many of them do, in which case we

---

23 See for example Elizabeth Boyd, Byron's "Don Juan": A Critical Study (New York: The Humanities Press, 1958), p. 57; John Jump, Byron's "Don Juan": Poem or Holdall? (The W. D. Thomas Memorial Lecture at the University of Swansea, 1968), p. 9; Jump provides the most detailed discussion of the persona's unifying function; Karl Kroeber, op. cit., p. 165; and Ridenour, op. cit., p. 144.

more properly call them commentary or intrusions. But a great many more do not, expatiating instead on a broad assortment of topics that have no bearing on the world or fate of Don Juan.

Apart from its great length, the work is hardly a dramatic monologue in any unusual sense. The persona is neither the protagonist of nor a witness to the story he tells, although he is a kind of protagonist in the situation in which he dramatizes himself as a writer. The structure as a whole must be seen, I believe, as an extended dramatic lyric, unified only by the sprawling and diverse character of the persona. Certainly, Don Juan is a narrative poem, but the story it tells is contained within the persona's drama. Juan's fortunes and travels are lively and interesting, but, more important, they provide occasions of contemplation for the persona. And the whole Juan-story is one object of contemplation among many.

The persona describes his manner of proceeding as "now and then narrating, / Now pondering" (IX, xlii). But even where he is "narrating," getting on with the story of Juan, he characteristically makes use of his Editorial-Omniscient point of view to keep himself in the forefront of the reader's attention. His dominance is nowhere more striking than in the tender and idyllic episode that describes the love of Juan and Haidée. While the intensity
of the young people's passion is persuasively narrated, the persona's sadness—not shared by the lovers—permeates the narrative. In their moments of greatest ecstasy, he is conscious of the transiency and potential for destruction of human sexual love:

Alas! they were so young, so beautiful,
So lonely, loving, helpless, and the hour
Was that in which the heart is always full,
And, having o'er itself no further power,
Prompts deeds eternity cannot annul.  

(II, cxcii)

Throughout this episode, moreover, the persona concentrates a great deal more attention upon Haidée than upon Juan, describing in emotionally fraught detail her beauty and pathos. Not only his sadder and wiser vision of human love, but his intense nostalgic response to the character of Haidée, a response that overshadows and subsumes Juan's response to her, dominate the episode and are as much the matter of the poem at this point as are the fates and feelings of the characters.

The emphasis on the persona rather than on the story derives also from Juan's being somewhat flimsily drawn, never vividly realized as a character. He is strikingly inarticulate and passive, for example. While the world in which he moves is detailed and believable, populated by many characters, Juan's responses to that world are rarely represented in such a way as to elicit our complete sympathy. His adolescent infatuation with
Donna Julia in the first Canto is examined from the persona's vantage point, from the perspective of one older and wiser in the ways of the human heart. We are invited to enter into the persona's ruefully mocking detachment rather than to participate in the pangs of Juan's passion. In the shipwreck that occupies much of Canto II, Juan is at his most resourceful and assertive. Yet the episode is dominated by the grim humor, the compassion, and the frighteningly matter-of-fact tone of the omniscient persona, and viewed from his shifting vantage point rather than filtered through Juan's more confined vision.

In short, we are constantly aware of the persona's mediating consciousness, itself shifting and responsive, dominating the work. His vision is more comprehensive than Juan's, occasionally more cynical or merely less sentimental, debunking Juan's self-deceptions, and more rigorously moral than anything Juan aspires to. To an unusual degree, the moral distance between narrator and protagonist diverts our attention from the characters and their world to the persona's response to that world.

Apart from its intensity of response, the persona's commentary is unusual in its extent and quality. Much of his commentary is directly relevant to the story, as I have said, but a great deal is irrelevant and disruptive, not only impeding the progress of the narrative, but exposing the characters and their world as fictions. Many of the
digressions concern the task of storytelling. Early in
Canto I, for example, he explains his abandonment of epic
procedure:

My way is to begin with the beginning:
The regularity of my design
Forbids all wandering as the worst of sinning
(I, vii);

but the "regularity" of his method is shattered by the
conclusion of the stanza,

And therefore I shall open with a line
(Although it cost me half an hour in spinning)
Narrating somewhat of Don Juan's father,
And also of his mother, if you'd rather
(I, vii),

the final line of which flippantly suggests that the selec-
tion and ordering of subject matter, far from participating
in some grand design, is up to the whim of the putative
reader. The stanza as a whole reminds us of the shaping
hand of the persona, and signals us that what design the
poem may have will be eccentric and idiosyncratic.

The idiosyncratic organization is most fully
apparent in Canto XII, where the persona announces:

But now I will begin my poem. 'Tis
Perhaps a little strange, if not quite new,
That from the first of Cantos up to this
I've not begun what we have to go through
(XII, liv).

This is facetiousness, of course, even perhaps sheer silli-
ness, but it goes to the heart of a serious matter. Al-
though Don Juan is an unfinished poem, we tend to assume
that what we have is the beginning and middle of an action
whose end is implied. But Byron's poem denies reader expectations and perversely partakes the nature of infinity, abandoning its protagonist for all eternity to the clutches of Her Frolic Grace, Fitz-Fulke, even that Keatsian intersection being produced ironically by the death of its creator rather than by any inherent necessity of the poem's structure.²⁵

In the incessant allusions to the conduct of his art and in the intrusion of his world into the work, the persona often comes close to representing the world and characters of the Juan-story as mere figments of his own fancy. The point, however, is to remind us again and again that we are reading an account of Juan's fortunes. We are prevented from entering in any easy or straightforward way into the fictional world. Its verisimilitude is secondary to the ongoing drama of the persona who is fabricating his account out of the rag and bone shop, to plunder Yeats, of imagination.

Although Andras Horn finds Byron "a foreign body in his own work . . . detrimental . . . to the homogeneity of the poem," he concludes that Byron's presence "suffices to

²⁵The manuscript beginning of Canto XVII, found at Missolonghi after Byron's death, suggests that far from proposing to finish the poem, he meant to continue it indefinitely. Michael Cooke provides a thought-provoking discussion of the work's essential interminability in "Byron's Don Juan: The Obsession and Self-Discipline of Spontaneity," Studies in Romanticism, 14 (1975), 285-302.
preserve Don Juan from disintegration." Some of the intrusions are undoubtedly lapses of art. Byron's tirade against his fellow poets (III, xci-xcv) is a clear expression of unassimilated autobiographical rancor. The address to the critic Jeffrey (X, xvi-xix) strikes a similar note, although the tone is ingratiating rather than rancorous. But autobiographical revelation also serves some valid effects in the work. The persona throughout is a kind of flimsy mask through which we feel we glimpse Byron himself from time to time. Life and art are thus represented as separated only by a thin partition. Again, the history of the persona's world functions to locate him in time and to limit his moral authority to that of an individual, a man speaking to men.

We may view Don Juan ultimately as a compendium of unassimilated elements, rich and diverse and entertaining but lacking artistic unity, or we may see it as being about the problems of assimilation and fidelity to life that an artist faces, the artificiality of representing human experience through the structures of narrative. In declining to organize life into art along usual lines, it either fails to be art or, as I believe, achieves an eccentric design of its own. The poem is not so much unfinished as

---

it embodies a view of life as inconclusive. It dismantles some articles of storytellers' faith in its refusal to select, to begin, to develop, or to conclude in any fashion that we recognize. It undermines the convention of godlike omniscient narration, being narrated by a persona who, besides his intelligence, wit, sympathy and idealism, exhibits wilfulness, irresponsibility, cynicism, self-indulgence—a persona, in short, who is a very comprehensive character and who has an equal regard for the demands of the marketplace and for the demands of truth. If the persona holds the poem together, he does so not in spite of his perversities, his emotionality, his artistic refusals, but because these are organized to challenge our notions of propriety, of human nature, and even of what art is all about.

Don Juan is perhaps the ultimate "lyrical ballad," if by that term we understand a poetry that mingles genres to explore the conflict of internal energies with external conventions, that in the course of telling a story expresses the struggle in the teller's consciousness between the multeity of experience and the reduction of that richness in the selective forms of art. Ironically, where Byron is most himself, as he is in Don Juan, he is also at his most Wordsworthian, but he goes farther than Wordsworth in dismantling the expectations of readers of stories.
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

What then may we claim as the distinctive contribution made by the Romantics to narrative, and does Romantic narrative exhibit a common and characteristic imaginative structure?

In the narratives of all three poets studied here, manipulation of point of view embodies thematic concerns. Wordsworth's ideal of story subordinates action to feeling, placing new emphasis on the mind of the narrator to explore the process of consciousness and its relation to the world of the senses. Coleridge's narratives dramatize the disparity between experience and discourse through narrators whose grasp of the mysterious worlds of their stories is precarious. Byron's later narratives use story as a means of expressing and objectifying the self, dramatizing the conflict between the human spirit and the conditions of life.

The chief points of view used by these poets are Editorial Omniscience, "I"-as-Witness, and "I"-as-Protagonist, all three of which have a dramatized "I," a persona or character, as storyteller. The poets use these dramatized narrators to represent and explore
the relationship of teller to tale. In Romantic narrative the objective story is typically accompanied by a subjective drama, the developments in the mind of the narrator responding to the story as he tells it.

Many Romantic storytellers are not fully reliable, their grasp of what they tell approximate and imperfect. Even where the point of view is Editorial Omniscience, while the narrator typically retains factual privilege and possesses unlimited access to information that would be unavailable to a witness, moral all-knowingness or reliability does not devolve upon him as a function of conventional expectation or a given of any prior category. His moral authority, therefore, is only that of an ordinary witness. The Romantic omniscient narrator also tends to be located, realized as a fictional presence having some degree of direct acquaintance with the world of the story, in order that vision and insight may be attributed. One effect of placing the narrator in time and space is to throw into relief the subjective, personal, limited character of moral vision, to show it as the product of the individual mind.

In fact, Romantic narrators of all kinds have in common that whatever authority they may aspire to is earned, achieved in the course of reacting to their stories, or explicitly established by a rhetorical introduction. Such authority, experiential rather than
systematic, asks only our relative credence; it operates not to define the world at large, nor even to provide a fixed definition of the world of the poem, but only to represent a single, subjectively wrought vision of that world. The narrators' reactions to their stories constitute truth that is partial, circumstantial and particular.

Romantic poetry in general deals with the transactions between mind and external reality. In the narratives treated here, external reality tends to be significant not in itself, but as the object of consciousness. The empirical world which the Romantics inherited was one denuded of value by the Enlightenment, a world "in which fact is measurable quantity while value is man-made and illusory." The Romantics responded to that world with a great effort at reconstruction, discovering in themselves the power to transform reality and to create meaning.¹ The infiltration of Romantic narrators into the stories they tell is a means of dramatizing the shaping and creative act of imagination in confrontation with the world of the senses.

The pervasive influence of Romanticism on later literature has led to some technical similarities between the poetic narrative of the early nineteenth century and the fiction of our own century. However, these resemblances

¹Langbaum, The Poetry of Experience, pp. 11 ff.
occur not because of specific influence exerted by the earlier writers upon the later, but because of a broad confluence of artistic concerns which led naturally to the selection of some of the same techniques. We advance our knowledge of each period not at all, and obscure some useful distinctions, by insisting too clamorously on the "modernity" of Romantic story.

Since by the end of the eighteenth century narrative writing was largely beginning to be confined to prose fiction, it is to prose fiction that we look for the narrative tradition that the Romantics inherited. Erich Kahler has shown that the shift to representing inner reality so pronounced in the novels of the late eighteenth century is the product of a long evolution in culture and consciousness.\(^2\) Accelerating this evolution, the Enlightenment created new forces urging artists to address the inmost being of man. In such a climate of moral urgency, from a tradition already probing inward to represent human consciousness and its relations with the external world, Romanticism came into being and developed its unique narrative forms.

Romantic narrative is, finally, of its own time, its structures constituting a metaphor for Romantic vision, redefining consciousness and the world. In his study of

\(^2\)The Inward Turn of Narrative.
Romantic nature imagery, W. K. Wimsatt finds a distinctive, prototypical imaginative structure. The terms of metaphor, tenor and vehicle, in Romantic usage exist in unusual relation to one another, being "wrought in parallel process out of the same material." Thus landscape, as an image, is "kept in focus as the literal object of attention," but it is also the source from which meaning or value is generated. This fusion or assimilation of tenor and vehicle is an instance of the interpenetration of subject and object, of consciousness and the visible world, that is at the heart of Romantic poetic thought.

In the larger structure of narrative, the fusion of narrating mind with the matter narrated is analogous. Tale and teller, like vehicle and tenor, are given their substance and particularity in dynamic relation to one another. The story exists to dramatize the character of the teller, the teller to shape the tale. As in the smaller structure of imagery, Romantic narrative keeps the objective fact, the tale, literally in view as the object of attention, but the tale is also the ground from which subjective meaning is wrought. The meaning of the whole is synthetic, deriving from both teller and tale, or more precisely from the transactions between the two.

---

In the fusion of subject with object, of lyric with narrative, of mind with nature, and of teller with tale, Romantic narrative imitates the structure of experience, proposing as the fundamental matter of its imitation the processes by which men think and feel and act. The poetry occupies a place in the narrative tradition linked both to the past and to the future of narrative, but exhibits a distinctive, characteristic imaginative structure unique to itself and to its age.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

Editions


Criticism


Durling, Robert M. The Figure of the Poet in Renaissance Epic. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1965.


Hunting, Constance. "Another Look at The Conclusion to Part II of Christabel." English Language Notes, 12 (1974), 171-76.


Jump, J. D. Byron's "Don Juan: Poem or Holdall?" The W. D. Thomas Memorial Lecture delivered at the University College of Swansea on Feb. 6, 1968.


Mounts, Charles E. "The Place of Chaucer and Spenser in the Genesis of Peter Bell." Philological Quarterly, 23 (1944), 108-15.


Stevenson, Lionel. "The Ancient Mariner as a Dramatic Monologue," The Personalist, 30 (1949), 34-44.


The dissertation submitted by Helen Herber has been read and approved by the following committee:

Dr. John Nabholtz, Director
Professor of English, Loyola

Dr. Eileen Baldeshwiler
Professor of English, Loyola

Dr. Thomas Gorman
Associate Professor of English, Loyola

The final copies have been examined by the director of the dissertation and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated and that the dissertation is now given final approval by the Committee with reference to content and form.

The dissertation is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Date

Signature