

TransactionNumber: 731956



Call #: PE1011 .C22

Location: LIB ANNEX

Article Information

Journal Title: CEA critic

Volume: 56 Issue: 3

Month/Year: 3 1994Pages: 28-42

Article Author: Bruhn, Mark J.,

Article Title: A Home Where the Heart Is: Wordsworth's Domestication of Coleridge's Supernatural Poems

Loan Information

Loan Title:

Loan Author:

Publisher:

Place:

Date:

Imprint:

Customer Information

Username: Lending

Lending User

No W#

Staff - None

Article Delivery Method:

Loan Delivery Method:

Electronic Delivery? Yes

Site: ILL

This material may be protected by copyright law (TITLE 17, U.S. CODE).



ILLNumber: -12743989

Interlibrary Loan Request Form

A Home Where the Heart Is:
Wordsworth's Domestication of Coleridge's
Supernatural Poems

Mark J. Bruhn

THIS STUDY OF POETIC RELATIONSHIPS BEGAN WITH THE WHIM-
sical notion that William Wordsworth's "The Brothers" documents an
early episode in the life of the Ancient Mariner, that Wordsworth's
Leonard is a youthful, though updated, version of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's
"grey-beard loon." Leonard, we'll recall, left his native Ennerdale at
fifteen to become "with the mariners / A fellow-mariner" (42-43)¹; he left
his brother James, too, a ward of the community. In twenty years at sea,
Leonard never forgot "his paternal home" (68), and at times his memories
of it and his longing to return produced vivid hallucinations:

. . . he, in those hours
Of tiresome indolence, would often hang
Over the vessel's side, and gaze and gaze;
And, while the broad blue wave and sparkling foam
Flashed round him images and hues that wrought
In union with the employment of his heart,
He, thus by feverish passion overcome,
Even with the organs of his bodily eye,
Below him, in the bosom of the deep,
Saw mountains; saw the forms of sheep that grazed
On verdant hills—with dwellings among trees,
And shepherds clad in the same country grey
Which he himself had worn. (53-65)

At last, with "some small wealth" and "a determined purpose to resume /
The life he had lived there" (66-70), Leonard arrives in Ennerdale, only to
find that James, his last familial tie to the place, is long since dead. The
news is crushing, and Leonard "relinquishe[s] all his purposes," abandons
Ennerdale forever, and, in the telescopic conclusion of the tale, "is now /
A seaman, a grey-headed Mariner" (427-35).

Of course, "The Brothers" has its own purposes quite apart from "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," and only a severe anachronism would lead us to identify the late-eighteenth-century Leonard as the Mariner of the Middle Ages; still, the relations between the two poems and their protagonists are notable and suggestive. Like Coleridge's Mariner, Leonard populates the vacant sea with the spectres of his imagination; like the Mariner, too, he ends up an isolated, self-alienated individual, placeless but "on shipboard" (434), passing, we may imagine, "like night, from land to land" ("The Rime" 619).² Given the first of several "grave defects" that Wordsworth found in Coleridge's poem—"that the principal person has no distinct character, either in his profession of Mariner, or as a human being who having been long under the controul of supernatural impressions might be supposed himself to partake of something supernatural"³—we may sense that Leonard's experience in "The Brothers" is of the type that, for Wordsworth, might *motivate* the psychodrama of the Mariner's voyage. By delineating a character-forming event in *his* mariner's life, in other words, Wordsworth would simultaneously illustrate the sort of event that would supply the Ancient Mariner with a "distinct character" and, consequently, account for his susceptibility to "supernatural impressions."

When Leonard returns to the sea, he is, like Coleridge's Mariner, a guilty and alienated man, and for much more natural reasons. James died, after all, by wandering off a precipice while walking in his sleep, a habit dating from Leonard's first departure for the sea and in which, as the priest explains, James blindly "sought his brother" (353). The priest's regretful wish that "to this hour / Leonard had never handled rope or shroud" (294–95) must be profoundly seconded by Leonard, for whom the phrase "rope or shroud" likely expresses not a redundancy but an unbearable causality, linking his seafaring life to his brother's death as cause to effect. Having left and lost James, having been complicit, albeit indirectly and unwittingly, in his death, Leonard understandably finds "that now, / This vale, where he had been so happy, seemed / A place in which he could not bear to live" (424–26). A desolating guilt urges his utter dislocation from the "native soil" to which "his soul was knit" (298), and he becomes finally what the priest mistook him for in the first place: "one of those who needs must leave the path / Of the world's business to go wild alone" (105–6). Leonard exiles himself at last both to the profession and to the psychic disposition of the Ancient Mariner, and thus, despite the facts of composition and of fictional place, may be said to *prefigure*⁴ and even to rationalize the character of Coleridge's Mariner. The alienated pastoralism that explicitly underpins all of Leonard's perceptions—take his tendency to hear "Oft in the piping shrouds . . . / The tones of waterfalls, and inland sounds / Of caves and trees" (47–49)—lends itself as a plausible pretext for the Mariner's:

Mark J. Bruhn

. . . yet still the sails made on
A pleasant noise till noon,
A noise like of a hidden brook
In the leafy month of June,
That to the sleeping woods all night
Singeth a quiet tune. (356–61)

With Leonard's aural hallucination as background, the Ancient Mariner's reportage seems a good deal less objective, the sounds he describes a good deal more like the product of his own overburdened mind. In effect, Wordsworth has domesticated the Mariner's "supernatural impressions," given them antecedents, located them, touchingly, in a shepherd's memories of his boyhood home. Wordsworth, it appears, naturalizes Coleridge's supernaturalism.

A much less fanciful example of Wordsworth's naturalizing designs is "Peter Bell," begun just after Coleridge completed the 1798 version of "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" (Jordan 23). Kathleen Coburn has summarized the structural parallels between "Peter Bell" and its more illustrious predecessor:

We have a lone Potter, instead of a lone Mariner—Peter is also a solitary wanderer figure—and the ass, not the albatross, a creature of the earth, not air, is the injured victim. There is the same wanton attack on innocence. Helped by the eerie light, and a frightening sense of disturbance in the elements, as in *The Ancient Mariner*, the Satanic instrument of this piece also falls in a trance; he too suffers the sense of being pursued, his eyes ache, he feels remorse, repents, learns to love his fellow-creatures, and is made fit for human society. . . . [The poem] is an attempt at what Wordsworth took to be the same theme as *The Ancient Mariner*: a crime against nature, punished by the laws of the universe, with restoration and reformation . . . following on repentance. (124)

Though Coburn's breathless thoroughness implies that Wordsworth's poem is unforgivably derivative, "Peter Bell" is perhaps better characterized as a domestication of Coleridge's tale, an attempt to rework its supernaturalism into the nature of rural England, human and otherwise. Wordsworth hinted at such a purpose in the dedication that accompanied "Peter Bell" when it was finally published in 1819:

The Poem . . . was composed under a belief that the Imagination not only does not require for its exercise the intervention of supernatural agency, but that, though such agency be excluded,

the faculty may be called forth as imperiously, and for kindred results of pleasure, by incidents, within the compass of poetic probability, in the humblest departments of daily life. (Jordan 41; *Poetical Works of Wordsworth* 188)

This declaration might lead us to expect a tale suffused with the domesticity and “common air” of a poem such as “Michael,” but in fact “Peter Bell” indulges in any number of at least *pseudo*-supernatural effects. These effects differ, however, from the more “genuine” ones described by the Ancient Mariner, because here an omniscient narrator carefully reveals how each one originates and has substance only in his hero’s mind.

“The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” is assuredly also a poem about its namesake’s mind, but its central narrator, the Mariner himself, seems unapprised of that fact, or, to put it another way, that fact never explicitly enters the poem. The Mariner describes his voyage as though it were entirely objective; our attention is drawn not to the Mariner’s psyche but to the supernatural “reality” it—for reasons the poem refuses to fathom— beholds.⁵ If we credit the “Spectre-ship,” the “seraph-band,” and the “voices in the air,” it is because the Mariner does so completely; if we find the Mariner’s moral dissatisfying, even discreditable on the poem’s own terms, it is because he fails to recount the rationalizing that led to it.

In “Peter Bell,” on the other hand, the narrator reports not only Peter’s “supernatural” impressions but also their actual and natural causes: All spring, at the touch of particularized circumstances and feelings, from Peter’s unbalanced psyche. Late in the tale, for instance, Peter beholds a “miserable vision,” apparently supernatural:

Close by a brake of flowering furze
He sees himself, as plain as day,
He sees himself, a man in figure
Just like himself, nor less nor bigger,
Not five yards from the broad highway.

And stretched beneath the furze he sees
The highland girl—it is no other—
And hears her crying, as she cried,
The very moment that she died,
‘My mother! oh! my mother!’ (1111–20)⁶

While Peter may be Mariner-like here (“with agony his eye-balls ache” [1123]), his vision has none of the seeming objectivity that the Mariner’s have. Because the narrator says plainly in the preceding stanza that “now the Spirits of the Mind / Are busy with poor Peter Bell” (1106), we readily distinguish the objective brake of furze from the subjective projections

Peter “sees” close by. His vision derives, quite explicitly, from the chance association of the moment before, when a ruined church put him in mind of “the Kirk” where he wedded his sixth wife, “a sweet and playful Highland Girl” (1026–30, 1076–90). Jolted by his encounter with the ass, Peter’s conscience—and reflections—naturally turn guilty. He recalls that the highland girl died pregnant with his child, her heart broken by his infidelities; instantly, he sees and hears her again, re-enacting the anguish of her last moments, a spirit summoned out of his own self-punishing imagination. Throughout the poem, Peter’s trembling perceptions of “supernatural agency” are similarly grounded within his mind, such that all fall easily “within the compass of poetic probability.” Though the action of the poem is patterned on that of “The Rime,” it must strike us as natural rather than supernatural,⁷ with the result that *this* tale’s moral—Peter Bell “became a good and honest man” (1320)—comes off as expected, even earned. Causes and consequences are everywhere determined, everywhere directed to this single end; and because the supernatural remains a contingent effect of the poem’s natural action and, except for Peter’s remorse, nowhere a cause of it, Wordsworth’s “whole poem,” quite unlike “The Rime,” appears “informed with the author’s conception of moral regeneration” (Haven 34).

As a feature of content, then, the supernatural enters “Peter Bell” only in the imaginative distortions of the hero’s perception; as a feature of the poem’s style, the supernatural repeatedly crops up as a potential narrative direction, but it intervenes only to be, as Wordsworth said, consciously excluded. By suggesting at appropriate moments the possibility of supernatural agency, the narrator lures us momentarily to adopt Peter’s phantasmic point of view, but the purpose is always finally to distinguish, for us but not for Peter, the subjective and the objective, the supernatural and the natural. For example, when Peter hears a “doleful sound” (706) such as he’s never heard before, the narrator does not tell us at once its true source, but instead first rejects several natural possibilities and then suggests a supernatural one:

’Tis not a plover of the moors;
’Tis not a bittern of the fern;
Nor is it like a barking fox,
Nor like a night bird of the rocks,
Or wild cat in a woody glen.
.....
Now should it be a crazy ghost,
One who must sing in doleful pain,
Through a long vision to be broken
When time shall snap the true love token
To which she sings her doleful strain? (711–30)

The progression of possibilities here surely mimics the anxious groping of Peter's mind and is designed to lead us, along with Peter, to the "conviction strange" "That something will to him befall, / Some visitation worse than all, / Which ever to this night befell" (790–95). Such conviction registers in the narrator's fictive audience, and he interrupts his tale to inquire, with feigned ignorance, "What ails you now my pretty Bess? / What is't that makes you look so grave?" (731–32). Having worked up the suspense, however, the narrator disillusiones all of his auditors, fictional and actual: What Peter hears is the fearful cry of the dead man's son, but this is a fact that Peter, naturally, never discovers. The same narrative tactic compels us, earlier in the poem, to entertain the horrified uncertainty Peter feels when he first discerns the figure floating in the river. Beneath an "uneasy" moon, as he whips the ass in "a fit of dastard rage," Peter "spies an ugly sight" in the "clear deep stream below" (513–20). The narrator queries, again proceeding from the natural to the supernatural:

Is it the shadow of the moon?
 Is it the shadow of a cloud?
 Is it the gallows there pourtrayed?
 Is Peter of himself afraid?
 Is it a coffin or a shroud?

Is it a fiend, that to a stake
 Of red-hot fire himself is tethering?
 Some solitary ward or cell,
 Where lies a damned soul in hell,
 Ten thousand miles from all his brethern? (521–30)

And again, while we are told within two stanzas that it is none of these things, but rather "a dead man's body" (545), Peter—still laboring under the conviction that "'tis a fiend with visage wan, / A live man-fiend, a living man"—collapses in a "swoon" (573–74).

Wordsworth's suggestive "question-and-answer" technique is akin to that which Coleridge uses in Part 1 of "Christabel"—composed the year before "Peter Bell" was begun—but Coleridge's strategy is, in effect, the reverse of Wordsworth's. In "Christabel," the narrator adopts, for the most part, a limited point of view, directing our attention to "objective" actions without divulging their causes or meanings. Thus, having placed Christabel in "the midnight wood" (29), he tells us that she "sprang up suddenly" (37) at the sound of a moan; he continues:

The night is chill; the forest bare;
 Is it the wind that moaneth bleak?
 There is not wind enough in the air

To move away the ringlet curl
From the lovely lady's cheek. (43-47)

The implication, of course, is that the moan is unnatural, and though he instantly discovers its source—"a damsel bright, / Drest in silken robe of white, / That shadowy in the moonlight shone" (58-60)—his "explanation" only heightens the mystery and our sense of supernatural doings. Shortly, as Christabel leads Geraldine past the kennel, the narrator remarks another moan and again questions it, asking this time for its motivation and meaning and, this time, discovering no answers at all:

The mastiff old did not awake,
Yet she an angry moan did make!
And what can ail the mastiff bitch?
Never till now she uttered yell
Beneath the eye of Christabel.
Perhaps it is the owlet's scritch:
For what can ail the mastiff bitch? (147-53)

This is deliberate mystification: Guided by an apparently ingenuous narrator, we irresistibly infer that Geraldine's presence provokes the dog, but such certainty can only work in us, to borrow the phrase from "Peter Bell," "conviction strange." When the narrator next queries the action, we need no explicit answers to recognize Geraldine as a supernatural being:

Alas! what ails poor Geraldine?
Why stares she with unsettled eye?
Can she the bodiless dead espy?
And why with hollow voice cries she,
"Off, woman, off! this hour is mine—
Though thou her guardian spirit be,
Off, woman, off! 'tis given to me." (207-14)

If in "Peter Bell" the narrator presents objective facts in order to distinguish a natural point of view from the protagonist's supernatural one, the narrator here manipulates such facts, in part simply by limiting his own point of view to them, in order to exclude all *but* the supernatural point of view. The supernatural here is not fixed in the protagonist's mind, as it is in "Peter Bell"; it is actual, embodied in the real world of the narrative action. One result of this, as scholarship on "Christabel" makes abundantly clear, is that the poem's moral significance becomes almost anyone's guess. Like the Ancient Mariner, Christabel moves in a world shot through with the "other," vivid but paradoxically inscrutable, and wholly alien to the one in which Peter Bell moves.

As we've seen, however, though Peter Bell roams a natural world, it appears to him much as Christabel's appears to her: supernaturally charged, rife with otherworldly influences and visions. Wordsworth captures his self-deluded awe in two resonant similes:

And Peter looks, and looks again
 Just like a man whose brain is haunted.
 He looks, he cannot chuse but look,
 Like one that's reading in a book,
 A book that is enchanted. (546–50)

The stanza suggests Peter's kinship not only with Christabel and the Mariner, two figures whose brains are similarly haunted, but also with the auditors and readers of their respective tales. Like the Wedding-guest, who "cannot chuse but hear" (22) the Mariner's story, we have no choice in Coleridge's "enchanted" narratives but to look, and look again, at actions and agents the likes of which we've never seen before. We, too, are "haunted" and credit "the intervention of supernatural agency," as we do not in "Peter Bell," because Coleridge "of his free will and judgement does what the Believing Narrator of a Supernatural Incident, Apparition or Charm does from ignorance and weakness of mind—i.e. mistake a *Subjective* product (A saw the Ghost of Z) for an objective fact—the Ghost of Z was there to be seen" (Coleridge, *Inquiring Spirit* 191).

To the extent that such "mistaking" secures our willing suspension of disbelief, it forces us, like Coleridge's narrators and characters, and, as Wordsworth implies, like Peter Bell, to resign the vantage from which the supernatural can be readily explained as more or less natural psychic phenomena. To Coburn, this is the peculiar power of Coleridge's style:

It is clear that however much Wordsworth *explains* and *describes* the fear and guilt elements in his Potter's behaviour, and he does so at length, with some "anxiety of explanation," this is a poem of behaviour—acts—events on the little rapid river Swale; Coleridge's is, without explanation, by direct emotional evocation, a poem of the inner life. (125)

Coburn dismisses too hastily, however, Wordsworth's method and purposes, and so misjudges the nature of his critique of Coleridge's supernaturalism. Comparatively speaking, it is Wordsworth, not Coleridge, who designs what Coleridge himself termed the "most impressive" variety of supernatural tale, that which gives us "the Means of explaining [the supernatural] as possible fact, by distinguishing and assigning the *Subjective* portion to it's [sic] true power" (*Inquiring Spirit* 191). Wordsworth's, too, is unquestionably a poem of the inner life, but he narrates that life from

without so that its subjective portion stands in clear and meaningful relief. Where Coleridge makes us see the supernatural, Wordsworth makes us see through it.

Though Coburn describes “the tedious versified prologue of *Peter Bell*” as “better left alone” (123), it is in the prologue that Wordsworth offers a pointed critique of “enchanted books” by contrasting the natural and supernatural modes of narration. The prologue opens in the latter mode:

There’s something in a flying horse,
There’s something in a huge balloon,
But through the clouds I’ll never float
Until I have a little boat
In shape just like the crescent moon.

And now I have a little boat
In shape just like the crescent moon.
Fast through the clouds my boat can sail,
But if perchance your faith should fail,
Look up and you shall see me soon. (1–10)

Even if we have no idea what the narrator is talking about, there can be no mistaking the magical improbability of his words. He wishes for a flying boat, and *voilà!*, he is wonderfully embarked. We could object, as Wordsworth did to “The Rime,” that “the events having no necessary connection do not produce each other” (Jordan 22–23), but necessary connections belong to natural narratives. Here, causality is supplanted by creative fiat: The boat is conceivable; therefore it is. Our poetic “faith” indeed depends on our willingness to “look up” from the solid world we inhabit to the “long blue field of ether” (33) in which the narrator, by virtue of his little boat, voyages. Emboldened by his supernatural vehicle, he begins to flaunt his distance from us, his earth-bound auditors, and the “thousand fears” (14) that beset us:

And did not pity touch my breast
To see how you are all distressed,
Till my ribs ached I’d laugh at you.

Away we go, my boat and I,
.....
Away we go, and what care we
For treasons, tumults and for wars? (18–27)

Directly, however, the claims of our “little earth” return upon him, and he admits that his heart isn’t in his miraculous flight:

The towns in Saturn are ill built,
 But Jove has very pretty bowers;
 The evening star is not amiss,
 But what are all of them to this
 This little earth of ours?

Then back again to our green earth.
 What business had I here to roam?
 The world for my remarks and me
 Will not a whit the better be;
 I've left my heart at home. (36–45)

The coordinate phrase “my remarks and me”—here replacing the earlier and expected phrase “my little boat and me”—signals what we’ve probably already surmised: The “little boat” is a metaphor for the narrator’s “remarks,” or, more precisely, for the vehicle of supernatural narration in general.⁸

In the ensuing dialogue between the narrator and the boat, Wordsworth playfully dramatizes his own rejection of the supernatural mode. The “pretty little barge” tempts the narrator with “the poet’s wild delights,” inviting him to leave the “green earth” to itself and journey instead to “the land of snow” or “a deep romantic land” or “the world of fairy” (78–96). Mistaking the narrator’s reluctance to sail away to such Coleridgean haunts, the boat chides, “Sure in the breast of full grown poet / So faint a heart was n’er before” (76–77). The narrator’s heart, however, is not “faint” but “at home,” and he retorts,

My little barge, you quite forget
 What in the world is doing.

Suppose now in the land of Fairy
 That we should play our sportive pranks
 Above those shadowy streams and there
 Should make discoveries rich and rare,
 The world would count us little thanks. (109–15)

Underlying the fun of all this are two related principles of Wordsworth’s narrative poetics: First, artistic purpose is to be conceived in moral terms—the world for his remarks *must* “a whit the better be”; second, the supernatural mode is unsuited to purposes so conceived.⁹ Because it creates fictive worlds by neglecting to some degree the real properties and engagements of the actual one, the supernatural mode, Wordsworth suggests, encourages a sort of ethical irresponsibility. The poet must suspend our natural

disbelief, and he does so in part by confining us to the supernatural point of view of a "Believing Narrator"; we are literally subject to the poem's verbal charms, for the poet nowhere admits an *unbelieving* point of view, including his own. He thus navigates us to "discoveries rich and rare" at the direct expense not only of physical nature but of human nature, his own and ours, as well. And the farther his tale voyages from our green earth and its quotidian doings, the fainter indeed the "heart" of its matter—or what Wordsworth elsewhere terms the quality of its moral relations—will become. Wordsworth's narrator accordingly disembarks from his magical boat in his own garden, greets a group of friends already gathered there, and prepares to tell his tale. He is now on the level, so to speak, with his auditors, "a man speaking to men," and he henceforth confines himself to the natural mode of narration.

The prologue to "Peter Bell" characterizes the supernatural mode as improbable, irrelevant, and morally tenuous, and though Wordsworth's tone here is far short of earnest, something fairly close to this characterization must have been his view—his reworking of "The Rime" in "Peter Bell" implies as much, as does his adaptation of "Kubla Khan" in "Hart-Leap Well."¹⁰ Of "Kubla Khan," Wordsworth might equally have charged, as he did of "The Rime," that "necessary connections" are lacking and that the imagery is "somewhat too laboriously accumulated" (Jordan 22–23). The poem abounds in "discoveries rich and rare," but the relationship of the pleasure-dome and the sacred river, or of these and the caves of ice, or of all of these and the damsel with the dulcimer, is anything but clear. To some degree, the purposes of the narrator remain beyond us, ciphered in the mysterious correlation of the Khan's architecture, the damsel's symphony, and the narrator's unrealized song. Yet, even in ideal form, the poem would not collapse this distance between the narrator's conception and our comprehension, but ritualize it:

And all should cry, Beware! Beware!
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!
Weave a circle round him thrice,
And close your eyes with holy dread,
For he on honey-dew hath fed,
And drunk the milk of Paradise. (49–54)

While he feasts in paradise, the enraptured narrator has no doubt "quite forgot what in the world is doing." His visionary words may transport us for a time, but they inform us finally only of his own supernatural difference.

In Wordsworth's naturalized version of the poem, "Hart-Leap Well," we are on altogether different footing. To begin with, the action is scaled down and domesticated: Instead of the Khan—an Eastern despot of the

Middle Ages—and his “miracle of rare device” (35), we have Sir Walter—an English knight perhaps of the Elizabethan age—and a modest “pleasure-house” (169) built not over a sacred river and “mighty fountain” (24) but beside a mountain stream and a “fountain in the dell” (62). We learn exactly why the pleasure-house was built (to commemorate Walter’s grueling chase of the hart and its death at the fountain); what it was used for (Walter and his “paramour,” attended by “dancers and the minstrel’s song,” “made merriment within that pleasant bower” [90–92]); and what became of it and its owner (Walter “died in course of time” [93], and the pleasure-house mouldered to dust). Like “Kubla Khan,” “Hart-Leap Well” falls into two distinct sections, the first narrated in the third-person and the second in the first-person, but the structure here is clarified so that the two parts cohere much more obviously.

In “Kubla Khan,” the narrator abruptly and inexplicably drops the tale of the Khan, set in the distant past, to address us from the present concerning his vision of the damsel with the dulcimer. The only bridge between the tale and the address is his intriguing statement in the latter that he, too, would build a pleasure-dome. In “Hart-Leap Well,” the narrator concludes *his* first part, which has seen Sir Walter through to his death, by announcing the second and thereby smoothing the transition: “But there is matter for a second rhyme, / And I to this would add another tale” (95–96). This second rhyme, moreover, is directly related to the first: The narrator happens upon the place where the pleasure-house had stood, encounters a shepherd there, and learns from him “that same story . . . / Which in my former rhyme I have rehearsed” (121–22). While he gathers the content of his tale at second hand, as the narrator of “Kubla Khan” appears to do, his source is nevertheless radically different: not an inspiring vision of an Abyssinian maid but an actual conversation with a “Grey-headed Shepherd” (161). Finally, whereas “Kubla Khan” lacks any explicit statement of its theme or moral focus, “Hart-Leap Well” drives, à la “Peter Bell,” to a Mariner-esque concluding moral:

The Being that is in the clouds and air,
That is in the green leaves among the groves,
Maintains a deep and reverential care
For the unoffending creatures whom he loves. (165–68)

All these revisions to Coleridge’s structure point out what is for Wordsworth probably the crucial distinction to be drawn between natural and supernatural narratives, a distinction that centers on the poet’s implied or express attitude toward nature. In “Kubla Khan,” narrative subject and purpose are determined by what can only be called the narrator’s transcendental desire; as he puts it, “I would build that dome in air, / That sunny dome! those caves of ice!” (46–47). The comment implies that his essential

interest in the Khan's architectural enterprise is as a metaphor for his own poetic one. The Khan may thus be typologically identified with the poet, through the mediating figure of the Abyssinian maid, whose supernatural symphony and song would, if revived within the poet, reconstitute the Khan's pleasure dome palpably in "air" (43–48). All three, it appears—the historical Khan, the visionary damsel, and the oracular narrator—aspire to establish the paradisaal dome in the midst of nature, to *realize* some form of transcendence. Just as the Khan contrives an actual conquest of physical nature, so the narrator contrives an imaginative conquest of his human nature, a visionary self-construction that would, as we've seen, set him apart from his auditors and effectively liberate him from their world. Human desire in "Kubla Khan," like the aesthetic that expresses it, aims well beyond the bound of nature.

"Hart-Leap Well" at first promises to re-enact this sort of typological identification of narrator and protagonist, for here, too, there appears to be a certain congruity in their artistic designs. Arriving on horseback and otherwise alone at the spot where the hart fell, each feels a more or less pastoral urge to create—Sir Walter, to fashion "a small arbour, made for rural joy"; the narrator, to "pipe a simple song for thinking hearts" (58, 100). As both creations bear the same name, we will likely sense some self-reflexiveness on the narrator's part throughout the first half of the tale, particularly when Sir Walter calls for "a cunning artist" to "frame" the object to be known as "Hart-Leap Well" (61–64). Any sense of their possible affinity, however, is rapidly undermined in the second part, where the narrator stands in his own present surveying the ruins of Sir Walter's endeavors. The scene itself explodes the transcendental boast that links Sir Walter to his prototype, the Khan—"Till the foundations of the mountains fail / My mansion with its arbour shall endure" (73–74)—and the shepherd's mediation of Sir Walter's tale subverts the potentially analogical relationship of the knight and his narrator into one of antagonism.

The shepherd opens up an alternative point of view, one that is invested in nature and therefore critical of Sir Walter's "supernatural" aspiration. The shepherd's sympathies lie fully with the hart and the land blighted by its death, and in endorsing them, the narrator explicitly marks his own departure from Sir Walter's methods and values:

'Grey-headed Shepherd, thou hast spoken well;
Small difference lies between thy creed and mine:
This beast not unobserved by Nature fell;
His death was mourned by sympathy divine.' (161–64)

There is a species of supernaturalism here, but it is accommodated to nature and wholly opposed to the excesses of human desire. The motives upon which the narrator founds his imaginative "Hart-Leap Well" turn out to be

the very reverse of those upon which Sir Walter built his actual one. Whereas Sir Walter contrived to exploit nature for pleasure and transcendence, the narrator aims to reveal the frailty of such aspirations and the final invincibility of nature. He must acknowledge, further—as Sir Walter and the narrator of “Kubla Khan” do not—that the “monument” of his own creation, the poem itself, is yet another “object” whose form is subject to and whose value is determined by nature:

‘She leaves these objects to a slow decay,
That what we are, and have been, may be known;
But at the coming of a milder day
These monuments shall all be overgrown.’ (173–76)

With such clear-sighted appreciation of the extent to which nature circumscribes all human enterprise, including his own poetic one, the narrator of “Hart-Leap Well” stands as the very antithesis of the supernaturally vaunting narrator of “Kubla Khan.”

To domesticate Coleridge’s supernatural poems, Wordsworth adopts their structures but alters the mimetic strategies, point of view, and moral focus with which those structures are elaborated. As a supernaturalist, Coleridge “imitates” agents and actions that, transgressing natural and rational orders, tend to be as mystifying as they are affecting, the more so because they are realized solely from the point of view of a narrator who is himself “under the controul of supernatural impressions.” Coleridge normally dissembles his own knowledge and purposes in order to solicit our willing suspension of disbelief, but he admits consequently some degree of obscurity in the “moral relations” of his poems. The actions and agents of Wordsworth’s naturalized versions, on the other hand, are imitated from the natural world and circumscribed by its laws. The narrator addresses the audience more or less as equals and secures “poetic probability” by providing a point of view independent of that of his main characters—a point of view from which the natural grounds of the action, as well as its moral significance, may be directly apprehended. Wordsworth’s final opinion of Coleridge’s narratives in their own right is probably unrecoverable, but his renderings of them, at once imitative and transmutative, suggest an ambivalent response, a balance of praise and censure. It is the sort of response we might expect from a poet whose muse is perhaps best figured by the Solitary Reaper, singing over her sickle and binding up the produce of nature. Who is she, after all, but the obverse of Coleridge’s muse, the “damsel with a dulcimer” made flesh and naturalized?¹¹

Notes

¹¹This and all other quotations from Wordsworth’s poems, except “Peter Bell,” are from *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*. For “Peter Bell,” I quote from *The Oxford*

Authors: William Wordsworth, because Gill's version, collated from the MSS. numbered 2, 3, and 4 by Jordan in the Cornell *Peter Bell* (cited hereafter as Jordan), renders the poem in its earliest recoverable form, as it appeared in 1799–1800—the period just after Coleridge completed "The Rime" and during which "The Brothers" and "Hart-Leap Well," the two other of Wordsworth's poems I treat here, were composed.

²Quotations from "The Rime" are from *Lyrical Ballads 1798*. All other quotations from Coleridge's poems are from *Poetical Works*.

³From Wordsworth's note to "The Rime" in the 1800 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, the same edition, of course, in which "The Brothers" first appeared. The note is reproduced in Jordan 22–23.

⁴In *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), in which "The Brothers" preceded "The Rime" in order of appearance, Leonard in one sense literally did "prefigure" the Mariner.

⁵For a full discussion of this point, see Haven 18–42. I am indebted to him as well in my brief discussion of "Kubla Khan."

⁶Coleridge, not surprisingly, particularly liked this passage: See his *Notebooks*, vol. 2, entry 2583.

⁷For a clear Romantic statement of the distinction between natural and supernatural narratives, see Leigh Hunt's "What Is Poetry?" The pertinent passage appears in Perkins 712.

⁸In later revisions, Wordsworth made this equation even more explicit: See *The Poetical Works* 189, ll. 121ff.

⁹The only thing surprising in these principles is their traditionalism: Both were more or less orthodox throughout the eighteenth century.

¹⁰Space does not permit me to treat here the parallels between another pair of poems, "Christabel" and "The Waggoner," but they are fairly obvious—a distressed lady discovered in a midnight wood, a screeching owl and growling mastiff, Lake country crags "each peering forth to meet the other" (4.22), etc. Here again Wordsworth recasts the stuff of Coleridge's poem in a naturalized form.

¹¹The interested reader should consult Jacobus's *Tradition and Experiment*, a book that came to my attention just as this article was going to press. Chapter 10 and the conclusion are especially pertinent.

Works Cited

- Coburn, Kathleen. "Coleridge and Wordsworth and 'the Supernatural.'" *University of Toronto Quarterly* 25 (1955–56): 121–30.
- Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *Inquiring Spirit: A Coleridge Reader*. Ed. Kathleen Coburn. Minerva P, 1968.
- . *Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*. Vol 2. Ed. Kathleen Coburn. London: Routledge, 1962.
- . *Poetical Works*. Ed. E. H. Coleridge. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1912, rpt. 1983.
- Coleridge, Samuel Taylor, and William Wordsworth. *Lyrical Ballads 1798*. Ed. W. J. B. Owen. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1969, rpt. 1989.
- Haven, Richard. *Patterns of Consciousness*. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1969.
- Jacobus, Mary. *Tradition and Experiment in Wordsworth's Lyrical Ballads (1798)*. Oxford: Clarendon P, 1976.
- Perkins, David, ed. *English Romantic Writers*. New York: Harcourt, 1967.
- Wordsworth, William. *Peter Bell*. Ed. John E. Jordan. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985.
- . *The Oxford Authors: William Wordsworth*. Ed. Stephen Gill. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1984, rpt. 1989.
- . *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*. Ed. Thomas Hutchinson. Rev. Ernest de Selincourt. London: Oxford UP, 1936, rpt. 1960.

Isaak Walton Killam Scholar, Dalhousie University