

LIFE IN DEATH/DEATH IN LIFE:  
TRAUMA, TESTIMONY AND THE 1798 *LYRICAL BALLADS*

By

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James R. Fleming

To my mother, Ann Marie Fleming, and my wife, Colleen Marie Fleming.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>page</u>
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	iv
ABSTRACT .....	vi
CHAPTER	
1    TRAUMA, TESTIMONY AND THE ENGLISH ROMANTIC MOVEMENT .....	1
2    “THE RIME OF THE ANCIENT MARINER” .....	13
3    WORDSWORTH’S LYRICS .....	21
LIST OF REFERENCES .....	32
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH .....	35

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Presently, literary critics and theorists are beginning to approach both modern and contemporary literary texts, as well as a variety of pre-modern literary texts, with an eye toward narrative representations of trauma and testimony. Drawing from the research and speculation into trauma and testimony by such critics and scholars as Dori Laub, Shoshana Felman, Jacques Derrida and Geoffrey Hillman, I examine representations of trauma and testimony in the 1798 edition of William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads*.

Due to the early English Romantic predilection for personal examination and the exploration of radical psychic states, the critical study of *Lyrical Ballads* must give close attention to textual representations of trauma and testimony to properly conceive of the psychic dimensions that both of these authors explore and represent. Through a close analysis of Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," the opening poem of the 1798 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey," the closing poem of the

volume, as well as Wordsworth's "The Complaint of a Forsaken Indian Woman" and "The Thorn" from *Lyrical Ballads*, I attempt to discern the radically different methods through which each poet comprehend and represent post-traumatic reactions. I draw largely from Derrida's concept of a traumatic occurrence being, for the survivor, a direct confrontation with "the imminence of death" to discuss the manners in which both Wordsworth and Coleridge attempt to reconcile the fundamental connection between life and death that they recognize as well as the resulting maps of the mind that they produce in their texts. I argue, furthermore, that the Wordsworth-Coleridge controversy has its roots in the poets' remarkably different conceptions of trauma and its effect on consciousness.

I conclude by arguing that William Wordsworth was himself deeply traumatized by the stark and decidedly pessimistic map of the traumatized mind that Coleridge presents in "Rime of the Ancient Mariner." I argue that Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey," as well as his "The Complaint of a Forsaken Indian Woman" and "The Thorn," serve to radically reconstitute "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and place Coleridge's text under a form of practical erasure.

## CHAPTER 1

### TRAUMA, TESTIMONY AND THE ENGLISH ROMANTIC MOVEMENT

In his seminal essay “The Internalization of Quest-Romance,” Harold Bloom argues that “the deepest satisfactions of reading Blake or Wordsworth comes from the realization of new ranges of tensions in the mind . . . what [they] do for their readers, or can do, is closely related to what Freud does or can do for his, which is to provide both a map of the mind and a profound faith that the map can be put to a saving use” (3), a map, that is, that can allow for the exploration of what Geoffrey Hartman refers to as “anti-self-consciousness” in early English Romantic poetry. According to Hartman, anti-self consciousness served as a remedy for “the corrosive power of analysis and the fixated self-consciousness” (48) for a number of the early English Romantic poets. Hartman suggests that “the Romantic poets do not exalt consciousness *per se*. They have recognized it as a kind of death-in-life, as the product of a division in the self. The mind which acknowledges the existence of immediate life knows that its present strength is based on a separation from that life” (50).

As Hartman argues, the intention of the early English Romantics was not “to escape from or limit knowledge but to convert it into an energy finer than intellect” (48), nor was it a simplistic or naive desire to “return to nature” or to some idealized form of primitive consciousness. Instead, the early English Romantics sought, at least in part, to present “a vital, didactical moment of ‘soul making’” (50), an attempt to construct “what Yeats calls an anti-self, for the purpose of recovering deeply buried secrets” (51), in consciousness in order, ultimately, to directly confront “the fact of self-alienation” (51)

that haunts a wide variety of early English Romantic texts. What the early English Romantics and, as I will argue in the following, Wordsworth and Coleridge in particular over the course of the 1798 edition of their *Lyrical Ballads* collection, attempted to develop through their explorations of consciousness is a remarkably different form of consciousness than what had been previously explored in English poetry. Instead, they attempt to present a form of consciousness that is not based around or grounded in a steadfast notion of truth or falsity, of simple memory and perception, but, rather, a form of consciousness that fully acknowledges the perils of consciousness as it confronts and attempts to reconcile itself to some form or another of psychological trauma.

In Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey," the opening and closing poems, respectively, of the 1798 edition of their *Lyrical Ballads* collection, the separation from immediate life that Hartman identifies as being central to English Romantic poetry is directly connected to past traumatic experiences for both the Ancient Mariner and Wordsworth's poet in "Tintern Abbey," experiences to which they both attempt to reconcile themselves through direct testimony to third-party listeners. But while Wordsworth's poet strongly implies a faith that his testimony and the map of the mind that is developed over the course of the poem can be put to something of a saving use, for his poet is indeed able to reconcile himself to the trauma he has undergone, Coleridge's vision is quite different. In "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," Coleridge presents a deeply and seemingly irrecoverably traumatized psyche unable to reconcile itself to the fundamental separation from life that it has undergone, a separation that has left the Ancient Mariner unable to draw any true intellectual or emotional strength from his experience or resulting testimony and recognize that such has any form

non-personal relevance. “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” then, provides a radically different map of the traumatized mind than the one presented by Wordsworth in “Tintern Abbey.”

Both the Ancient Mariner and Wordsworth’s poet issue testimonies to what amounts to their own deaths, or, more exactly, to the death of their former selves before their consciousness altering traumatic experiences, that which Jacques Derrida refers to as the “imminence of death,” from a state of relative disconnection from life that is quite akin to the death-in-life that Hartman identifies as being at the core of the early English Romantic tradition.

In the following, I argue that the fundamental difference between Coleridge and Wordsworth’s major contributions to the *Lyrical Ballads*, and the very roots of what would eventually develop into the Wordsworth-Coleridge controversy, can be located in each poet’s decidedly different conception of the effects of trauma upon the psyche. While both Coleridge and Wordsworth realize that psychic trauma is intrinsically connected to death, in “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” Coleridge presents a narrator who is ultimately unable to accept the imminence of his death and is left unable to escape from the vicious circle of perpetual traumatization and recurrent testimony that he is be caught within. I will speculate that Wordsworth was deeply traumatized by the decidedly dark and pessimistic conception of trauma and testimony that Coleridge posited in “Rime of the Ancient Mariner” and attempted to place Coleridge’s text under practical erasure, drastically revisioning it over the course of “The Complaint of a Forsaken Indian Woman,” “The Thorn,” and “Tintern Abbey,” before finally rejecting the poem outright

and attacking it in his 1800 “Note to ‘The Ancient Mariner’” and excluding it from subsequent editions of *Lyrical Ballads*.

Throughout a number of their poems in the first edition of their *Lyrical Ballads*, both Wordsworth and Coleridge wrestle with matters of anti-self consciousness and death-in-life, though from radically different perspectives and to remarkably different ends. Stephen Maxfield Parish argues that in terms of the early stages of the Wordsworth-Coleridge controversy, “what was clearly on the surface a disagreement about poetic diction may, underneath, have been a disagreement about dramatic method” (317) between the poets, with each positing a radically different conception of the proper form of psychological drama that should be explored throughout *Lyrical Ballads*. For Wordsworth, poetic diction was simply a matter dramatic propriety. Wordsworth felt that proper poetry should be in the language actually used by real people. Throughout his early poetry, Wordsworth sought to capture the psychologies of actual, common people. Coleridge’s primary poetic interest was in grand philosophical representations, with the dramatic effects of a poem serving simply as a vehicle for the conveyance of philosophical ideas.

In *Demure: Fiction and Testimony*, Jacques Derrida argues that to issue a testimony to a traumatic experience is to testify to the “imminence” of one’s own death, for “one testifies only when one has lived longer than what has come to pass . . . the witness is a survivor, the third party, the *testir* and *testis* . . . the one who survived . . . I am the only one who can testify to my death—on the condition that I survive it” (45). Trauma serves to divide a survivor’s psyche, for, as Derrida writes, “at the moment of my attestation I am no longer the same as the witness who lived and who remains irreplaceable” (65). In

the wake of a catastrophic cultural or personal traumatic event, one is psychically split—divided between the self before a traumatic occurrence and after. There is, then, as Derrida posits, the “I” who experiences a trauma and the particular, though now separate “I” who testifies—that is, for the purposes of this study, the Mariner who experiences and the Ancient Mariner who testifies, and, in “Tintern Abbey,” the poet who experiences and the poet who testifies. For Coleridge’s Ancient Mariner, a fundamental division of identity and, moreover, consciousness has occurred, a marked separation from life that touches upon the very imminence of his own death. Considered from this perspective, it can be seen that “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” and Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey” both explore radically new ranges of tensions in the mind and, in turn, suggest entirely new conceptions of the mind as well, conceptions, quite remarkably, that pre-date Freud and, for that matter, Derrida’s conceptions of trauma and its effect upon and relation to consciousness by several generations.

To properly locate the acts of testimony in *Lyrical Ballads*, we must begin by discerning the differences between acts of literary confession and those of literary testimony. Arthur C. Cochrane argues that a literary confession “always contains explicitly or implicitly a polemic, a condemnation . . . moreover, the confession does not judge others . . . it confesses an error, a denial, perhaps a blasphemy which has become a reality in its midst” (76; 78). As Cochrane insists, when one issues a confession, one admits to guilt and identifies a past action (or ideology or belief) as being wrong (and, in turn, false) and a present course of action (that, usually, of issuing a confession) as being correct (and, in effect, true). A confession is always personal, and tends, at least in terms of literary confessions, to concern (at least directly) one’s own self and actions. Derrida

views the act of confession as being ultimately self-centered, focused not on establishing and conveying self-knowledge and identity but, instead, on offering a pardon for one's past actions and presenting an autobiography that displaces and erases one's own perceived guilt or responsibility.

Unlike a confession, a testimony has no inherent design on rendering a steadfast claim of truth or falsity in regard to one's past actions or experiences. A testimony unveils one's experience(s) and strives toward developing some form of self-knowledge in response to those experience(s), forging a link between the self before an event and the transformed self after the event has transpired. Though I agree with Julian Wolfreys's assertion that "testimony is irreducible to some concept or figure, some genre or species of narrative with historical narrative or literature" (192), that it is impossible to develop a rigorous and wholly developed theory of trauma as it relates to narrative testimonies to trauma, I would qualify his argument by adding that there are indeed a few key, demonstrable elements that we can identify in terms of discerning what constitutes an act of testimony.

In the most basic respect, an act of testimony represents a pronounced need to tell, to certify and render a traumatic experiences in the psyche by the subject that has undergone such. There is, at least in the psyche of the survivor driven to offer a testimony to his or her experience(s), an imperative need to come to know their story unimpeded by the ghosts of the past against which they have been forced to protect themselves, for one has to know one's buried truth in order to properly and fully undertake the task of living. Unlike a confession, a testimony serves to discover and

discern an inherent truth, to get to the proverbial bottom of things, but not to design or invent such.

Testimony represents an attempt to comprehend experience(2) and to reach a form or dimension of self-knowledge by virtue of the establishment of a self-narrative through which one might begin to discern some semblance of self-knowledge in respect to a traumatic occurrence. And self-knowledge in testimony is key, for, as Derrida insists, “a testimony is always auto-biographical; it tells, in the first-person, the shareable and unshareable secret of what I was in a position to live, see, hear, touch, sense, and feel” (43). But it is not simply to outside listeners that the subject testifies to his or her trauma but to the self as well, for the purpose of rendering and ordering a traumatic experience in consciousness. A testimony serves to place one’s self on record and assert, as Derrida insists, that

I am the only one to have seen this unique thing, the only one to have heard or to have been put in the presence of this or that, at a determinable, indivisible instant; and you must believe me because you must believe me—this is the difference, essential to testimony between belief and proof—you must believe me because I am irreplaceable. (90)

A testimony functions as to establish and enforce one’s individuality in relation to a traumatic psychic experience. Testimony offers a claim of selfhood against the utter incomprehensibility and relative imminence of death that is closely connected to a traumatic psychological occurrence.

In its most basic respect, trauma can be defined as a psychic wound, not merely a shock, but rather the result of a particular catastrophic psychic event that has transpired and, in turn, seeped into and affected consciousness. Cathy Caruth defines trauma

as the response to an unexpected and overwhelmingly violence or violent events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena. Traumatic experience, beyond the psychological dimension of suffering it involves, suggests a certain paradox: that the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it; that immediacy, paradoxically, may take the form of belatedness. (92)

Dori Laub argues that “massive trauma precedes its registration” (57). Whether the trauma be cultural or historical in nature or highly and entirely personal, “the observing and recovering mechanism of the human mind are temporarily knocked out” (57) and the occurrence of a consciousness-altering trauma evades full mental perception, reception and incorporation into the psyche. Cathy Caruth defines a post-traumatic reaction, as being

the result of an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events, in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, and uncontrolled occurrence of hallucinations, flashbacks and other intrusive phenomena. As it is generally understood today, traumatic disorders reflect the direct imposition on the mind of the unavoidable reality of horrific events, the taking over . . . of the mind by an event it cannot control. (24)

According to Freud, a traumatic event can be defined as a delayed and anxious recognition of the significance of a particular memory or previous event that was not considered threatening at the time of its occurrence but has since taken on a decidedly different meaning in consciousness. For Freud, the repetition compulsion is a response to a past occurrence that was psychologically catastrophic to such an extent that it was prevented from being fully assimilated into consciousness. As a result, the enigmatic past haunts the subject, leaving him or her, much like Coleridge’s Ancient Mariner, continuously “repeat[ing] the . . . material as a contemporary experience instead . . . of remembering it as something belonging to the past” (18).

According to Juliet Mitchell, “a trauma . . . must create a breach in a protective covering of such severity that it cannot be coped with by the usual mechanisms by which we deal with pain or loss . . . in trauma we are untimely ripped” (121). She argues that “Freud, Lacan, Green, and Herendez . . . speak and write of the hole (*trou-ma*), breach, or utter dependence . . . as the condition expression of trauma” (124). Derrida notes that “a testimony is always given in the first person” (38), and that it can only be delivered by the survivor of a particular traumatic event. Derrida posits that testimony “is first a present act” (*Demure* 38) for “the martyr [when he testifies] does not tell a story, he offers himself” (38). We can see an example of this in “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.” The Ancient Mariner does not simply tell his story, but offers himself entirely to the Wedding Guest, both in body and in spirit. When subjects testify to their trauma, they offer themselves and reveal themselves in a completely unbridled fashion.

According to Jennifer Lackey, “it is often assumed that neither memory nor testimony is, strictly speaking, a generative source of knowledge: while the latter transmits knowledge from one speaker to another, the form preserves belief from one time to another” (471) instead, it is generally thought that knowledge can only be transferred or transmitted through testimony. Hartman argues that “traumatic knowledge would seem to be a contradiction in terms” for it “is as close to nescience as to knowledge” (“On Traumatic Knowledge” 538) and contends that:

Knowledge of trauma . . . is composed of two contradictory elements. One is the traumatic event, registered rather than experienced. It seems to have bypassed perception and consciousness, and falls directly into the psyche. The other is a kind of memory of the event, in the form of a perpetual troping of it by the bypassed or severely split (dissociated) psyche. (538)

It is through testimony, Hartman contends, that traumatic knowledge, the knowledge of the particular occurrence and resulting effect of a traumatic experience, becomes transmissible from one party to another. A testimony to a traumatic occurrence, in Derrida's view, "brings to knowledge," "it says something, it describes something, it makes known . . . it informs; one could almost say that it recounts, it gives account" (38).

Over the past decade a number of critics have begun to recognize a fundamental connection between various forms of Romantic ideology and literary expression and traumatic experiences and reactions, with numerous critics and biographers of Romantics figures making generous use of theories of traumatic experience to explain various Romantic predilections, tropes and images. Though, as Deborah Jenson notes, "the Romantics did not employ a discourse of trauma" (16) per se in their respective ideologies and poetic approaches, Romantic expressions of consciousness, in their myriad of forms, are "characterized by a lachrymose, often Christological crimson-tinged-if-not stomach-turning pathos" (16). Furthermore, as she claims, Romantic texts on both sides of the English Channel tend to show a pronounced concern with matters of Romantic wounding, which serves, on a basic level, as part of what Jenson refers to as the Romantic "discourse of pain" (17) with symbolic wounds (whether psychic or physical) serving to "represent Romantic narcissism and melodrama" (17). It must be noted that Jenson neglects to consider the traumatic elements of the lyrics of Wordsworth, for example, whose pathos, as we can see in both "Tintern Abbey" and "The Thorn," while often lachrymose in mood are hardly "crimson-tinged" or, for that matter, "stomach-turning." Rather, in Wordsworth's lyrics traumatic reactions and testimonies tend to be meditative and subdued, as his testifying subjects struggle to order their experiences and

provide them with some measure of voice and render them transmissible and capable of being brought to knowledge. Melodrama and narcissism, which might be apparent in Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," are hardly evident in Wordsworth's lyrics.

Leon Waldoff connects "the self-dramatizing moments of new awareness in the Romantic lyric" (42) to traumatic experiences and psychological reactions, and relates the lyric form, in Wordsworth in particular, closely to traumatic occurrences and reactions. Waldoff contends that traumatic reactions "in Wordsworth's poetry are also deferred reactions to an earlier event or memory charged with traumatic potential. The poet represents them as moments of unexpected discovery, but the dynamics of repetition . . . and of traumatic experience indicate that they are always revisionary afterthoughts" (43).

Waldoff further contends that

Moments of new awareness in Romantic poetry differ in a crucial way from those in traumatic experience: They typically do not result in flight, phobia, inhibition of thought, or paralysis of action, but rather result in a presentation of self-dramatization and wish-fulfilling variation on a traumatic theme . . . Moments of new awareness in Romantic poetry, therefore, through deferred reactions, try to solve a crisis or present a consolation. Rather than register painful insights into the self, as in traumatic resolution. (45)

In early English Romantic poetry, this new awareness can be associated with a new understanding and perception of the effects of traumatic psychological experience, a perception that is not associated with the traumatic experience itself (which is, in its immediate form, beyond immediate comprehension or representation). In Wordsworth, this new awareness tends to be dedicated not simply to explication of trauma, but to providing something of a resolution to it, a manner in which the mind can directly confront trauma and begin to reconcile itself to the imminence of death through a process

of individuation, to render it no longer merely traumatic, but as a moment of new psychological awareness. In “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” Coleridge does not position the Ancient Mariner’s testimony as a point of creation for a new awareness that is beyond the realm of the traumatic. Rather, Coleridge provides a form of traumatic resolution at best, one that is fundamentally incapable of solving its crisis or preventing anything in the way of a sure-footed consolation.

## CHAPTER 2

### “THE RIME OF THE ANCIENT MARINER”

In “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” Coleridge does not chronicle the initial occurrence of the Ancient Mariner’s trauma directly, but, rather, positions the Ancient Mariner as the direct narrative source of our knowledge of what has happened to him, in turn positioning both the Wedding Guest and we as readers, though to a far lesser extent, as party to its creation. The Ancient Mariner’s trauma now exists for him entirely in memory, the only place in which it can exist. What we learn of the Ancient Mariner concerns only himself in direct relation to his traumatic experience, for he does not recognize himself as having any form of purpose or existence apart from it. In this respect, we might consider the Ancient Mariner’s testimony to be a flawed testimony, perhaps even an outright failure of testimony at that. Coleridge provides no indication that the Ancient Mariner’s ritualistic testimonies provide him with anything in the way of liberation or peace. At the conclusion of his testimony to the Wedding Guest, it appears as if the Ancient Mariner is still locked in an endless cycle of obsessive recounting that serves only to perpetuate his trauma.

Over the course of his testimony, the Ancient Mariner formulates no sure-footed comprehension of his experience and seems to remain in the same static psychological position in which he considers himself to have been when he was pulled aboard the skiff-boat, refusing to fully recognize and accept the actuality and utter incomprehensibility of his experience, the fact that he has, in essence, died, or, at the very least, undergone an experience that is quite analogous to death. The Ancient Mariner, as we realize, has

entered into what constitutes a radically different ontology and returned, then, an entirely different man, one for whom, as Derrida would say, only “chaos remains” (Derrida 92). The Ancient Mariner refuses to recognize that a fundamental divide has occurred in his psyche and that his former self is now another, that he has lived longer than what has come to pass and has been witness to the death of his former self.

During his testimony, the Ancient Mariner repeatedly attempts to affirm the actuality of his life to the Wedding Guest, resisting even the slightest notion that he too might have been, or, in fact, might still be, among the dead.

The many men so beautiful,  
And they all dead did lie!  
And a million million slimy things  
Liv'd one-and so did I.

(lines 238-241)

He states, furthermore, that “Seven days, seven nights I saw that curse,/ And yet I could not die,” (263-264) insisting, in essence, that his death was not and is not imminent. Still, even despite his claims to the contrary, the Ancient Mariner touches upon the possibility of his own death and his intrinsic relation to it during his testimony to the Wedding Guest.

I mov'd and could not feel my limbs,  
I was so light, almost  
I thought that I had died in sleep,  
And was a blessed Ghost.

(307-310)

He describes himself, in essence, as being dead at that point in his past experience and somewhere beyond his mortal coil. Yet he continues immediately after to attempt to affirm his status among the living, stating that, “But ere my living life return'd,” (410), even though the skiff-boat crew found him, as he says,

Like one that had been seven days drown'd  
My body lay afloat:

But, swift as dreams, myself I found  
Within the Pilot's boat.

(509-602)

With this in mind, the Ancient Mariner's encounter with the figure of Life-in-Death (as Coleridge names her in the 1817 version of the poem), takes on a far deeper level significance than has previously been considered by critics of the poem. The Ancient Mariner recalls the specters of Life-in-Death and Death playing a game of dice for the lives he and his crew-mates, resulting, after the victory of Life-in-Death over Death, in the deaths of everyone on board save for the Ancient Mariner, which, as Michael O'Neil insists, "makes . . . human existence as arbitrary as a throw of dice" (82) for the Ancient Mariner, and leaves his entire conception of the world in virtual chaos. Interestingly, the Ancient Mariner refers to the figure of Life-in-Death as a "Night-Mair," suggesting her intrinsic relation to his psyche at the time of his testimony, for it is through nightmares, as Cathy Caruth argues, that "the survivor is forced, continually, to confront [the threat of death in the past] over and over again" (62). We might see the figure of Life-in-Death as the very symbolic personification of the Ancient Mariner's traumatic reaction to his confrontation with the imminence of his own death.

David S. Mial takes a decidedly different view of the origin of the Ancient Mariner's initial point of traumatization, contending that his traumatization originates not with his encounter with Life-in-Death and Death, but, rather, with his witnessing the death of his two hundred crewmates, arguing, in essence that the Ancient Mariner suffers from an extreme form of survivor's guilt. He contends that for the Ancient Mariner "such an overwhelming encounter with death results in a psychic closing-off which is at the same times accompanied by a profound sense of guilt. To have been singled out for survival, by being stronger or luckier than others, is itself to be guilty" (646). What Mial

does not recognize, though, is the integral connection between the figure of Life and Death and the Death of the Ancient Mariner's crewmates. It is, after all, Life and Death who is the ultimate catalyst for the death of the Ancient Mariner's crewmates.

The naked Hulk alongside came  
 And the two were playing dice;  
 "The Game is done! I've won, I've won!"  
 Quoth she, and whistled thrice.

. . .  
 Four times fifty living men,  
 With never a sigh or groan,  
 With heavy thump, a lifeless lump  
 They dropp'd down one by one.

(191-194; 208-211)

Mial's critique assumes that the traumatic incidents which the Ancient Mariner testifies to actually occurred in the manner in which he presents them to the Wedding Guest and that his testimony represents a readily discernable, literal truth. Mial does not consider the likely possibility that the Ancient Mariner is not recollecting exactly what occurred out on the sea, but, instead, a deeply symbolic account of his own understanding of his now inexplicable experience. Furthermore, the Ancient Mariner's account might represent what Michael D. McDonald refers to as the Ancient Mariner's refusal to face the brutal truths "regarding human existence" (543). MacDonald argues that the Ancient Mariner's testimony can be "interpreted as a mental adventure" (546) for his tale clearly "mingles conscious and subconscious experience" (546). The origin of the Ancient Mariner's initial traumatization might be beyond his recollection and understanding.

It deserves note that the Ancient Mariner does not issue his account directly to the reader (or, for that matter, to himself as an internal monologue) but, rather, to a listener placed directly within the reality or ontology of the poem. O'Neill argues that "this process of witnessing is an integral part of the experience of reading The Ancient

Mariner" (83). But that is true for not only the Wedding Guest, but for the reader and the Ancient Mariner himself as well, all of whom are positioned as witnesses in the text, albeit at different ontological levels.

The Ancient Mariner's choice of the Wedding Guest as his listener is clearly not a random or haphazard decision. He claims that,

I have strange power of speech,  
The Moment that his face I see  
I know the man that must hear me;  
To him my tale I teach. (lines 634-637)

Still, Coleridge does not identify what exactly it is that the Ancient Mariner looks for in his listener, only that there is, indeed, something, a certain type of listener, that he seeks. Interestingly, the Wedding Guest is presented by Coleridge as being virtually anonymous (as is every human figure in the poem as Susan Eilenberg points out, suggesting that "anonymity is the common linguistic condition of people and things in [Coleridge's] tale" ((289))) and without a past. Daniel MacDonald argues that the Wedding Guest "is the archetype of one living a frivolous, surface existence, ignoring the deeper realities" (550), of life and consciousness, much like the Ancient Mariner represents himself as having been before shooting the albatross. In this respect, the Wedding Guest appears to mirror the Ancient Mariner, with his own experience of listening to the Ancient Mariner's testimony serving as a reflection of the Ancient Mariner's own traumatic experience.

At the start of the Ancient Mariner's account the Wedding Guest is not a willing listener to his tale. It is only through "hypnotic" means that the Wedding Guest listens to the Ancient Mariner's tale, an account which he "cannot chose but hear" (22), just as the Ancient Mariner himself does not, as McDonald writes, "choose to face the hard facts of

reality. Invariably, reality is thrust upon him" (352). Through his testimony to the Wedding Guest, it becomes apparent that the Ancient Mariner is recycling and reconstructing his own traumatic experience through his testimony. At the opening of the poem the Wedding Guest is presented as being much like the Ancient Mariner at the start of his journey, seemingly innocent and fancy-free, is reluctantly seized by a supernatural power (in his case the Ancient Mariner and, in the Ancient Mariner's case, the specters and other supernatural elements that he encounters), and forced to "witness" virtually the same horror as the Ancient Mariner, and is left, as Coleridge writes, "like one that hath been stunn'd/ And is of sense forlorn" (664-665). One can easily imagine the Wedding Guest going about wandering and confronting others after his encounter with the Ancient Mariner, saying, "It was an Ancient Mariner,/ And he stoppeth me . . ."

It seems possible, then, diagnose the Ancient Mariner, then, with an acute case of post-traumatic stress disorder (and with a repetition complex to boot), resulting from the undoubtable horror of his experience and the resulting intrusion of such upon his psyche. The Ancient Mariner's obsessive need to testify might be viewed as an attempt to keep his story fresh, for, as Dori Laub notes, for the subject of a traumatic occurrence, "the events become more and more distorted in their silent retention and perversely invade the survivor's daily life" (79). For the longer the story of a traumatic occurrence remains untold the more the survivor doubts the validity of what has occurred. As the sole survivor, it is his sole responsibility to tell, for, as Shoshana Felman argues, "to be a witness is take responsibility for truth . . . to take responsibility—in speech—for history and for the truth of an occurrence, for something which, by definition goes beyond the personal, in having general (non-personal) validity and consequence" (204). The Ancient

Mariner's mind has clearly been hijacked by his trauma, a trauma he can neither reconcile himself to nor, for that matter, fully comprehend. The Ancient Mariner does not recognize that his testimony has any form of non-personal validity or consequence, that it can reach beyond himself and his listener and be put to a saving use.

Wordsworth's ultimate rejection of "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" is well known. In his 1800 "Note To 'The Ancient Mariner,'" Wordsworth claimed that

the poem of my friend has indeed great defects; first, that the principles person has no distinct character, either in his profession of mariner, or as a human being who having been long under the control of supernatural impressions might be supposed himself to partake of something supernatural: secondly, that he does not act, but is continually acted upon: thirdly, that the events having no necessary connection do not produce each other; and lastly, that the imagery is somewhat too laborously accumulated. (389-390)

Wordsworth's assertion that "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" "contains many delicate touches of passion" (390) is especially notable, given Derrida's insistence that the concept of "passion" as it relates to a testifying subject implies not only "finitude" (26) but also "liability . . . imputability, culpability, responsibility" (27) and "an engagement that is assumed in pain and suffering, experience without mastery and this without active subjectivity" (27). A sense of passion, a passionate impulse, a passion to tell "has become inseparable from the desire to avow, for the confessional testimony and from truthfulness, from telling the other and identifying with everything" (26), as Derrida contends, "implies an engagement that is assumed in pain and suffering, experience without mastery and this without active subjectivity" (27). A sense of passion or a passionate impulse is connected, intrinsically, to a testimonial act. In essence, every testimony arises not out of a passion, but is, in fact, a passion in itself, for, as Derrida insists, "a passion always testifies" (27). The passion that Wordsworth identifies so

many fines touches of throughout “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” is that of testimony, a testimony the originates in a sense of culpability and impunity, itself an engagement with pain and suffering, lacking equally both mastery and subjectivity. In his 1800 “Note to ‘The Thorn,’” Wordsworth further defines the role of passion in poetry, contending that “poetry is passion: it is the history or science of feelings; now every man must know that an attempt is rarely made to communicate impassioned feelings without something of an accompanying consciousness of the inadequateness of our own powers, or the deficiencies of language” (389). In this respect, Wordsworth’s definition of poetic passion might also serve as an early definition of traumatic testimony and a realization of the crucial connection between traumatic representation and poetic narration.

## CHAPTER 3

### WORDSWORTH'S LYRICS

In such *Lyrical Ballads* pieces as the “The Complaint of a Forsaken Indian Woman,” “The Thorn” and particularly “Tintern Abbey,” Wordsworth demonstrates a particular interest in matters of testimony to psychological trauma. In “The Complaint of a Forsaken Indian Woman,” Wordsworth positions his narrator as a testifying subject, though one without a present listener or witness. Her testimony is very much an internal testimony delivered entirely to her self. Unlike Coleridge’s Ancient Mariner, she calls out for death and renounces her seeming status among the living after falling ill and being left behind by her tribe. As she lays abandoned yet still alive, she states that “An yet I am alive/Before I see another day,/Oh let my body die away” (lines 8-10). Here Wordsworth offers a testifying subject who clearly recognizes the imminence of her own death yet remains, despite her resignation to her fate, unable to die. Unlike the Ancient Mariner, the Indian woman recognizes that she has, indeed, loved longer than what has come to pass for her. She contends that her soul, her “fire,” is now dead, “yet it is dead, and I remain” (12). She feels nothing in the way of pleasure or pain now; she is but a ghost of her former self. All she wishes for is death. “Forever left alone I am,/ Then wherefore should I fear to die?” (59-60). By the end of the poem, the Indian woman, much like Coleridge’s Mariner, still has not died. In terms of the Indian woman’s attitude toward death, Wordsworth’s poem can be seen as a radical revisioning of “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” for it practically reverses the very nature of the Ancient Mariner’s testimony. The Indian woman does not have the same benefit of a witness as the Mariner

does. The fact that she cannot die, despite her wishes to the contrary, might indicate the beginning of Wordsworth's own understanding of the intrinsic connection between witnessing and the completion of a testimony that can allow one to fully confront and accept the imminence of their death.

In "The Thorn," Wordsworth attempts yet another reconfiguration of "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," though in this case he focuses primarily on revising the figure of the Ancient Mariner. Stephen Maxfield Parish contends that "'The Thorn' is not a poem about an abandoned mother and her murdered infant . . . nor a poem about a maternal passion" (99). Rather, as Parish insists, "The Thorn" is in many respect very much a poem about psychology, about the waking of the mind of the narrator who happens himself to be an old Mariner. The events that are recounted in the poem are unimportant and irrelevant except in terms of how they reflect the workings of the narrator's own imagination. According to Parish, the poem's "central 'event' has no existence outside of the narrator's imagination" (100). It is not until the seventeenth line of the poem, when he begins to provide a first hand testimony to have witnessed the plight of Martha Ray. Parish contends that "his testimony is highly important because he has already suggested that no one else has seen her" (102), with the Mariner claiming that "I never heard of such who dare/Approach the spot when she is there (lines 98-99), and that his testimony, in turn, is uniquely and entirely his own.

In "The Thorn," Wordsworth experiments with a different form of poetic narrative, one rather akin to Coleridge's in "The Ancient Mariner" in its introspecting and degree of philosophical awareness. Jacobus notes that "'The Thorn' is not just a poem about suffering, but about the difficulty of comprehending it" (24). Over the course of the

poem, the narrator (himself a mariner) tells of Martha Ray's constant and unfailing misery and her inability to come to terms or any rigorous understanding of what has occurred as well as the Mariner's inability to grant it any semblance of meaning or order, for there is a great deal of knowledge that he utterly lacks, as he insists that "I cannot tell how this may be" (line 243). The Mariner issues a testimony to what he has been, somehow, inexplicably, in a position to hear and to see. Wordsworth's Mariner, though, is clearly quite different from Coleridge's Ancient Mariner. In his "Note on the Thorn," Wordsworth describes his narrator as

a Captain of a small trading vessel . . . who being past the middle age of life, had retired upon an annuity or small independent income to some village or country town of which he was now a native, or in which he had not been accustomed to live. Such men having little to do become credulous and talkative from indolence; and from the same cause . . . they are prone to superstition. On which account it appeared to me proper to select a character like this to exhibit some of the general laws by which superstition acts upon the mind. Superstitious men are almost always men of slow faculties and deep feelings; their minds are not loose but adhesive . . . (388)

Again Wordsworth seems to be providing a reimagining of Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," positioning his Mariner as a version of Coleridge's Ancient Mariner divorced from his traumatic reaction and fully capable of undertaking the task of living. For Wordsworth, the purpose of "The Thorn" was not to represent supernatural occurrences, but, indeed, to dismiss them. In his 1800 "Note to 'The Thorn,'" Wordsworth stated that "it was my wish in this poem to shew the manner in which . . . men cleave to the same ideas; and to follow the turns on passion, always different, yet not palpably different, by which their conversation is swayed" (388). Wordsworth, then, recasts Coleridge's Ancient Mariner as simply a superstitious man whose curiosity and imagination get the best of him and lead him into practical hallucination.

In “Tintern Abbey,” Wordsworth shifts perspectives and positions his narrator as the sole consciousness in the poem and the testimony offered serves as a testimony to the poet’s own experience. The crucial difference between Coleridge’s Mariner and Wordsworth’s poet in “Tintern Abbey” is that while the Mariner is incapable of recognizing and reconciling the fundamental psychic split between himself before his trauma and afterwards, Wordsworth’s poet is able to begin to do so over the course of his testimony. Wordsworth’s poet issues his testimony from an entirely different psychological disposition than that of the Mariner. His disposition is not one of obsession and borderline madness like that of the Mariner, but, rather, one of quiet and reserved contemplation.

Though absent long  
These forms of beauty have not been to me,  
As is a landscape to a blind man's eyes;  
But often, in lonely rooms, and mid the din  
Of towns and cities, I have owed to them,  
In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,  
Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart. (lines 23-28)

The time of “rapture” at the sights before him has passed, though a new feeling has arisen within him, one of discontentment and doubt. A pronounced strand of melancholia runs throughout the poet’s narration, a sense of loss and pain, though hardly as acute as the misery that the Indian woman and Martha Ray cry of.

For I have learned  
To look on nature, not as in the hour  
Of thoughtless youth; but hearing oftentimes  
The still, sad music of humanity. (89-92)

This is the first clear indication that a separation has occurred within the psyche of the poet. Harold Bloom argues that in "Tintern Abbey," "Wordsworth comes to a full understanding of his poetic self. This revelation, though touches upon infinity, is

extraordinarily simple. All that Wordsworth learns by it is a principle of reciprocity between the eternal world and his own mind . . ." (140). Bloom reads the poem, then, as "a sublime act of humanity, and prepares us for the Wordsworth who is the first poet ever to present our human condition in its naturalistic truth, vulnerable and dignified, and irreducible, not to be explained away in any terms, theological or analytical, but to be accepted as what it is" (148). While Bloom does not recognize the pronounced element of trauma in the poem, he does recognize the acceptance that rests at the core of the poet's testimony. Jacobus argues that "'Tintern Abbey' proffers a statement of belief; individual consciousness finds its fullest expression in the consciousness of something beyond the self" (104). What Jacobus does not explore are the consequences of the poet's realization of his own divided nature, namely the power of the trauma he has endured and, mutually, the testimony he offers.

Sometime over the course of the past five years, the poet seems to have undergone a significant psychic trauma, though clearly not one that is represented in as overt and explicit a manner as the Ancient Mariner's. The poet speaks of how,

In darkness, and amid the many shapes  
Of joyless day-light; when the fretful stir  
Unprofitable, and the form of the world,  
Have hung upon the beatings of my heart,  
How often, in spirit, have I turned to thee  
O sylvan Wye! Though wander through the woods,  
How often has my spirit turned to thee!

(lines 52-58)

The poet further asserts that "many recognitions [are] dim and flint somewhat of sad perplexity" (60-61) that his memories are fading, that he feels disconnected, with his "genial spirits . . . decay[ing]" (114), hinting, quite possibly, that something dark and deeply disturbing has occurred in his past.

Richard Onorato connects the poet's underlying traumatic reaction to Wordsworth's unconscious attachment to his mother, who died when the poet was eight years-old. Waldoff contends that "when the speaker is identified with the biographical Wordsworth, his defensive insistence that 'Nature never did betray' and his anxiety over absence can be traced to Wordsworth's traumatic loss of his mother . . . or to possibly some earlier disturbance in their relationship" (71). One can also easily read the poem through Wordsworth's own biography and associate his traumatic reaction not only to the early death of his mother, but also to later the failings of the French Revolution and his broken love affair with Annette Vallon. But to examine "Tintern Abbey" in search of any direct statement or indication of what the poet's trauma might be serves only to dismisses what Heidi Thomson considers to be one of the poem's fundamental points, particularly

The loss of script to articulate "powerfully disturbing statements" in a controlled manner. For Wordsworth it is no longer possible to articulate painful experiences in the ultimately reassuring forms of sensibility . . . it . . . creates the lonely burden of finding a form for expression of the emotions which accompanying these painful experiences . . . "Tintern Abbey" is Wordsworth's experiment to consider how he himself copes with the loss of innocence and with the disappointments of the insufficiency of recompense.

(534-535)

Like the Mariner, Wordsworth's poet suffers from a lack of access to any external frame of reference, an acute ability to formulate a psychic connection between himself before his mind-altering trauma and after. He is left disjointed and disconnected by his experiences, whatever exactly they might consist of, and struggles to cope with his divided consciousness and lost innocence. Jacobus contends that in "Tintern Abbey," Wordsworth is more concerned "with what is apprehended rather than seen" (110), what is felt more so than what is comprehended. The poem explores, as Jacobus argues, "the

area lying between experience and recall, past and present” (123), a realm beyond that of ordinary consciousness.

Throughout “Tintern Abbey” we find the poet wrestling with not only the difficulty of comprehending his inexplicable experience, but, also, a sense of incomprehensibility in terms of his life before the trauma occurred. He states that he feels himself to be “changed, no doubt, from what I was, when first/ I came among these hills” (lines 67-68) as a younger man. He refers to the “unremembered pleasure[s]” (32) of his previous (pre-traumatic) experience, as well as his “unremembered acts/ Of kindness and love” (35-36) and apparent new found sense of the world being “unintelligible” (41). He makes further mention of his “half-extinguish’d thought,/ With many recognitions dim and faint” (59-60), before concluding, finally, that “I cannot paint/ What then I was” (76-77). The poet is fundamentally divided not only from any direct comprehension of his experience, but also any clear understanding of his past self. The trauma he has endured has greatly upset the very foundations of his psyche, leaving him grasping, at the opening of his testimony, for meaning and some semblance of self-understanding in the wake of his traumatic experience.

Heidi Thomson focuses, in particular, on the role of the poet’s sister in the poem and argues that “Tintern Abbey” is ultimately “about the necessity of a shared experience with a beloved person. Moreover, the poem argues that the certainty of a shared experience far outweighs a merely remembered or projected experience” (535). Though Thomson acknowledges that the poet is engaging in memory work with his sister, she does not recognize the testimonial nature of the poet’s address. It is not simply an expression of “the need for an extended vision within a circumscribed context” (Thomson

535) that the poet offers, as Thomson claims, but, more exactly, a testimony to trauma. Wordsworth's primary focus in his address is not, at least directly, an attestation to "the infinite superiority of shared experienced over the individual, isolating one" (535), in fact it is anything but, at least fundamentally.

The poet's address, like the Ancient Mariner's, represents a single, highly particular vision, for, as Derrida argues, "A witness and a testimony . . . must first be singular, whence the necessity of the instant: I am the only one to have seen this unique thing, the only one to have heard or have been put in the presence of this or that at [an] . . . indivisible instant . . . when I testify, I am unique and irreplaceable" (40).

The primary purpose that the figure of the poet's sister serves in the poem is that of the listener. It is to her, perhaps, (and, at least in part, because of her) that the poet is able to pronounce his testimony and give it structure and form, for, as Dori Laub notes, during a testimony to a trauma occurrence "the listener . . . is a party to the creation of knowledge . . . the testimony to the trauma is, so to speak, the blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed for the first time." (57) She is, quite clearly, physically present during the testimonial act ("For though art with me, here, upon the banks/ of this fair river; thou, my dearest friend" ((lines 115-116))), yet unlike the Wedding Guest, she offers the poet nothing in the way of doubt, assertion or protest, only the necessary silence in which he can testify. She is, in this respect, the ideal listener for the poet's testimony.

Dori Laub asserts that, in the midst of a testimony, "the task of the listener is to be unobtrusively present, through the testimony," for "the listener to trauma . . . needs to know 'the lay of the land'—the landmarks, the undercurrents, and the pitfalls of the

witness and himself . . . that the speaker about trauma on some level prefers silence so as to protect themselves from the fear of being listened to” (58).

In “Tintern Abbey,” the poet connects Dorothy to his former self, stating that,

And in thy voice I catch  
The language of my former heart, and read  
My former pleasures in the shooting light  
Of thy wild eyes. Oh! Yet a little while  
May I behold in them what I once was . . .

(lines 117-121)

In “Tintern Abbey,” the poet’s experiences, as fragmented as they might be, are still entirely his own. Though he suggests that his sister might indeed suffer as he has in the future (“If solitude, or fear, or pain, or grief,”/ Should be thy portion,” ((lines 144-145))), he does not identify his trauma as being shared with her. The poet recognizes his trauma as being uniquely his own.

But unlike Coleridge’s Wedding Guest, who repeatedly interrupts the Ancient Mariner’s address with his own exclamations and comments and stands as a virtual doppelganger of the Ancient Mariner’s younger self, in “Tintern Abbey,”

Dorothy is a living, recognizable, present person, and not just a metonymic signified . . . Her identity cannot just be read in terms of the speaker’s own self . . . the address to Dorothy is not only about the meaning she has for the speaker as a younger version of himself in response to the speaker’s loss of time.

(Thomson 539)

What is remarkable is the fact that the poet connects this vision of Dorothy to his *former* self and not to his *present* self. She reveals to him what he is beginning to recognize himself to no longer be. Bloom argues that Dorothy is “an incarnation of [the poet’s] earlier self . . . In her wild eyes he sees the gleam that he can no longer see in nature, but that once he did see, so that he almost literally reads his former pleasure in the eyes of another” (146; 147). Wordsworth’s poet has begun to accept that a fundamental

and irrevocable division has occurred in his consciousness (one that seems to be somewhat akin to Jung's notion of individuation) and does not attempt to resist or deny that separation like the Ancient Mariner does.

That time is past,  
And all its aching joys are now no more,  
And all its dizzy raptures. Not from this  
Faint I, nor mourn nor murmur; other gifts  
Have followed, for such loss, I would believe,  
Abundant recompense, For I have learned  
To look on nature, not as in the hour  
Of thoughtless youth, but hearing oftentimes  
The still, sad music of humanity.

(lines 84-92)

By the conclusion of "Tintern Abbey," Wordsworth's poet is able, in however fragmented a fashion, to begin to issue a testimony to the imminence of his own death. We haven't any indication that the poet's testimony will be endlessly repetitive (or, for that matter, that we could fairly diagnose him with a Freudian repetition complex), at least in the static sense that the Mariner's appears to be. Clearly the poet is able by the end of his testimony to distinguish between himself *now* and himself *then* as being wholly separate entities. And in that recognition lies the fundamental difference between "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and "Tintern Abbey," as well as that of Coleridge's Mariner and Wordsworth's poet. While the Ancient Mariner appears to be locked in a static and vicious circle of seemingly endless testimony and re-traumatization, both for himself and for his listeners, in which he refuses to acknowledge the imminence of his own death. Wordsworth's poet is able to at least begin to recognize and move beyond such, to accept "that time is past," to begin a process of individualization in which he is able to realize that he has, in essence, lived longer than what has come to pass, and that the man he once was, the form of consciousness he once possessed, is no longer, and that

there is life in death and that some form or another of present strength can indeed be drawn from such.

Wordsworth's attempted revision and ultimate rejection of "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," suggests, perhaps, that he himself was traumatized by the text and the particular conception of trauma and testimony that Coleridge suggested throughout it. Wordsworth attempted, throughout a number of his contributions to the 1798 *Lyrical Ballads*, to counter and erase Coleridge's vision, to drain it of its force and ultimate weight. Wordsworth's "Note on 'The Ancient Mariner'" and his refusal to incorporate the poem into the subsequent editions of *Lyrical Ballads* suggests the degree of his antipathy toward the poem and his desire to put it under erasure, to both remove it from publication and to radically rewrite it through "The Complaint of a Forsaken Indian Woman," "The Thorn," and "Tintern Abbey." In that respect, the Wordsworth-Coleridge controversy might be considered to have ultimately been a controversy over the nature and propriety, for each of the poet's, of traumatic and testimonial poetic representation, namely the method through which trauma and testimony should be presented in contemporary poetry.

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## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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