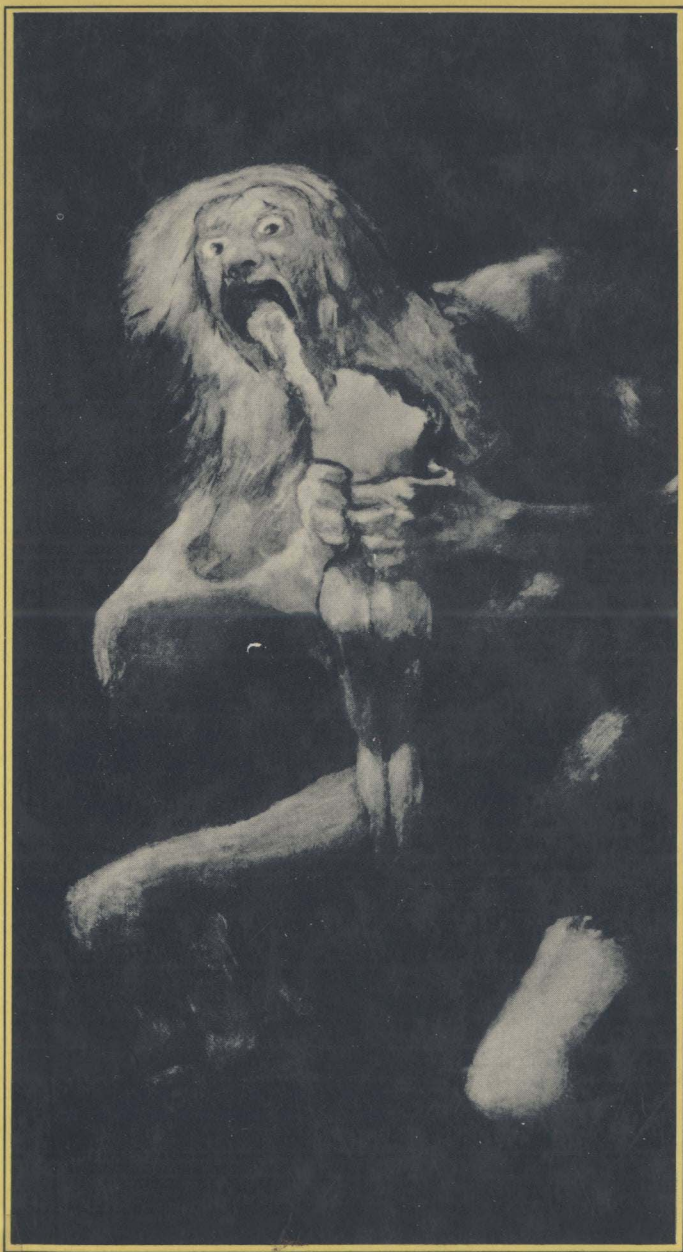


BYRON AND THE EYE OF APPETITE

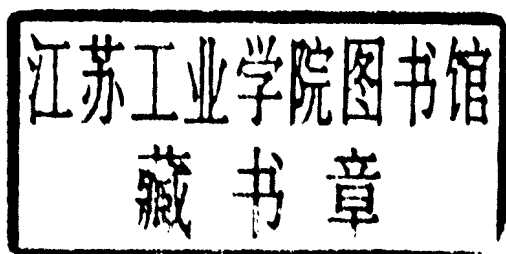


MARK STOREY

BYRON AND THE EYE OF APPETITE

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Preface

Whatever form it takes, criticism no doubt presumes too much. My excuse for this particular act of presumption must be that some quite basic things still need to be said about Byron. Although I am anxious that we should 'see him whole', and see the connections between different aspects of his work, I do not regard what follows as anything other than a very incomplete, introductory account.

Byron's attempts to define poetry frequently refer to the passions ('Are not the passions the food and fuel of poesy? . . . Poetry is the expression of an *excited passion* . . .'), and it is the passions that form the connecting link between my six chapters. Interestingly, much of the contemporary response to his work focused on the 'power' of his verse, what Scott in his review of *Childe Harold* summed up as that 'powerful genius . . . searching the springs of passion and of feeling in their innermost recesses': there is a clear relationship between power and passion. Like the other Romantic poets, from whom he is too often separated by a critical *cordon sanitaire*, Byron is deeply curious about the nature of feeling, and how different varieties of feeling can lead to forms of knowledge. This is as true of the early tales as it is of the later satires. What I have tried to do is to pursue some of the ramifications of this obsession without trying to be comprehensive. It might seem odd for a study of Byron not to make more than passing mention of *Manfred*, or the dramas, or *The Vision of Judgment*; I can only plead that particular texts seem to demand especial attention. I am particularly interested in showing how some poems work, in terms of Byron's exploration of the extremes of feeling, and what the connections are between those passions and their accommodation in verse.

Again, it would have been possible to adopt a much more 'developmental' approach, examining the processes whereby Byron moves away from what he came to see as a 'wrong

revolutionary poetical system', towards the constraints of the *ottava rima*. But enough has been said about that elsewhere; it should be evident that my aims are rather different, and do not include a careful chronological working-out of Byron's growth as a poet. I should also say that this book grew out of the chapter on Byron in my *Poetry and Humour from Cowper to Clough* (1979), and there are several points in that earlier essay that I have not reiterated here. I have wanted especially to examine some of the early tales, and to continue the process of rehabilitation begun by critics such as Robert Gleckner and Jerome McGann: it seems extraordinary that so much of the non-satiric writings can be even now dismissed, both in introductory works and in more scholarly accounts. *Childe Harold* demands full discussion, because it remains such a complex poem, and to some extent my third chapter is an attempt to clear the ground for the fourth; the two chapters on *Don Juan* examine some of the ways in which Byron works out in his major satire what he calls in *Childe Harold* 'the fitting medium of desire'. For all his apparent recklessness, Byron is a writer acutely conscious of literary propriety, and that is what this book is about – the paradoxes and perplexities of discerning and expressing the appropriate passions. Byron describes himself in a letter to Teresa Guiccioli as an 'Observer of the Passions', but his observation, as the first chapter suggests, is itself of a curiously complex kind – hungry, all-consuming, fascinated, but aware that satiety can lead to disgust. Such keen observation leads to the romantic tales, but also to the satires. The book begins and ends with the paradoxes of seeing, with the 'eye of appetite' that can, in the rare case of Aurora Raby, see 'matters which are out of sight'.

I should add that this book is not concerned with Byron's personality. I have no doubt that he could, and frequently did, behave abominably. The important fact is that such a man was capable of such poetry: Byron's scrutiny of the passions is often puzzled, anxious and wary, but it is, in the last resort, profoundly moving. I have quoted extensively, for what matters in this book is Byron's own voice.

There are some books to which I owe debts that cannot be repaid in source notes. Anyone wanting to get closer to Byron

will need to read William J. Calvert, *Byron: Romantic Paradox* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1935); George M. Ridenour, *The Style of 'Don Juan'* (New Haven, Conn., 1960); Andrew Rutherford, *Byron: A Critical Study* (Edinburgh and London, 1961); Robert F. Gleckner, *Byron and the Ruins of Paradise* (Baltimore, 1967); Jerome J. McGann, *Fiery Dust: Byron's Poetic Development* (Chicago and London, 1968) and *'Don Juan' in Context* (1976). Leslie Marchand's edition of the *Letters and Journals* (1973–82) has become indispensable, as has McGann's Oxford English Texts edition of the *Complete Poetical Works* (3 volumes so far published, Oxford 1980–1). For *Don Juan* I have been glad to use the Penguin edition, edited by T. G. and E. Steffan and W. W. Pratt (Harmondsworth, 1973, rev. 1977).

As for personal debts, these are too many and too various to be recorded publicly. But most books would not get far if it were not for particular people: in this case, I want to thank Andrew Brown, Martin Pumphrey and Ian Small for their advice and support. James Boulton, Seamus Heaney, David Lodge, Raman Selden and J. R. Watson helped things along, perhaps unwittingly, at various stages. Anne Buckley has, again, been the ideal typist. My parents, Christopher and Gertrude Storey, have as always given me every encouragement; Olivia Smith has found time from her own labours to offer her committed interest and faith in what she was hardly allowed to see; Tom, Jonathan, Hester and Hannah Storey, with their truly Byronic understanding of the claims of feeling and laughter, have kept me going.

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1 The 'Eye of Appetite'

You speak of Lord Byron and me – There is this great difference between us. He describes what he sees – I describe what I imagine – Mine is the hardest task.

(Keats, September 1819¹)

The difference between Byron and Keats was not as great as either poet would have wished: but it was sufficiently marked for both of them to chew at it in fascination. Even if we might want to challenge the evaluative implications of Keats's verdict here, he is, as usual, being more perceptive than he might realise. In fastening on Byron's concern with what he sees, he does, of course, hope to diminish him; and posterity might well have been glad to accept such diminishment, as sanction for its own refusal to allow to Byron the accolade of Romantic imaginative vision. It is as though Keats were speaking for all the other major Romantic poets: behind his bold assertion ('you see the great difference', he goes on, apparently unaware of his appeal to the organ he denigrates) we might hear a whisper of Wordsworth's ire at Crabbe's mere poetry of 'fact'.² It has become hard to think of the Romantic poets outside the pale of the imagination: Coleridge's esemplastic power (like his opium) has indeed had its own binding effect,³ and, just as Byron is being excluded with great firmness by Keats, so he has been excluded by a poetic and critical tradition that owes more to Keats than anyone has been prepared fully to admit. And Byron, in his haughty way, offers up his own hostages to fortune, inviting the exclusion he receives. His letters are as revealing as Keats's in what they tell us of his attitude to his craft, and his proud boast just five years before Keats's dismissal of his efforts was precisely that 'I could describe what I had seen better than I could invent'.⁴ It was to what he called with some amusement 'that very material organ'⁵ that his early, so-called oriental tales owed not merely

their existence but their value: he had been to Greece and Turkey and Albania, and to have been was to have seen.⁶ And to have seen was to begin to know. 'How I do delight in observing life as it really is', he declares, and we can begin to see the complexities implied in that casual observation.⁷ To observe life as it really is could well involve the most strenuous bending of the imagination's sinews. There could be more to sight than seeing. In other words, Keats's opposition between seeing and imagining might serve the truth less well than it serves his own purposes. Desperate needs require desperate measures.

If, though, we can for a moment remove Keats from his own pronouncement, and focus on the Byronic half of the equation, then we can see the important truth in all its baldness. Byron is indeed obsessed with what he sees and with how he sees it. It is impossible to know of the particularities behind Keats's comment, which poems he had in mind. The extraordinary thing is how all-embracing a comment it becomes, perceptive in a way it doesn't actually want to be. The poet who in disgust throws down the first two cantos of *Don Juan* onto the deck of the boat taking him to Italy wants to hug to himself the weight and the scorn of that gesture. It is of the nature of Byron's particular and peculiar resilience to allow that gesture, that unmagnanimous contempt, and then to refuse it. There is an early instance of this in 1813. When John Murray had responded to *The Giaour* with an uncertain sense of poetic and commercial propriety, it was typical of Byron to respond in his publisher's terms, turning into compliments what could have been taken as something less flattering. 'I question', he wrote, 'whether ever author before received such a compliment from his *master* — I am glad you think the thing is tolerably *vamped* and will be *vendible*.'⁸ Ironically, commercial and poetic scruples were in the end satisfied in equal degree. Byron worked at the poem with an assiduousness that spoke more about his artistic conscience than he or his publisher might have acknowledged, and the poem sold well. In a much more complicated way Byron's work as a whole takes Keats's comment on itself and throws it back. *The Giaour*, *The Corsair*, *The Prisoner of Chillon*, *Parisina*, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, *Don Juan* — all seem to say, 'Yes, Johnny Keats, with your piss-a-bed poetry and your f—gg—g imagination, you are

right, we describe what we see. We acknowledge our limitations. But once we acknowledge them, they cease to be the limitations you imagine them to be. We can all make virtues out of necessity'.⁹ Byron's work transforms dismissal into praise. It is in fact glad to be dismissed for the right reasons, in the knowledge that those right reasons will eventually counter the need for dismissal. In one sentence Keats has effected, from Byron's point of view, a summation devoutly to be wished. He has made one of the central points about a poet who has so often seemed to lack any central point at all. That 'very material organ' is very material indeed.

Byron's challenge to Keats is thrown down most brazenly in canto V of *Don Juan*. The hero (though that is not how he presents himself) and his friend Johnson have been bought at a slave market by the eunuch Baba, and taken back to the seraglio he serves with such untroubled ease. The setting – exotic, mysterious, naughty – has a suggestiveness that Byron plays on knowingly: the sexual ambiguity allows him to fend off the erotic. And this is where the challenge to Keats lurks, the Keats in particular of 'The Eve of St Agnes'. The similarity of the contexts points up the essential differences, even whilst those differences are ironically denied by a Byron lazily working at full stretch. For, at the centre of his most fully imagined poem, Keats places two figures locked in the eyes' embrace. As Madeline sleeps and dreams, Porphyro, in his closet, looks and looks, and we watch his gaze. The gaze, like the poem, is one of tenderness and awe and quietness, requiring as its ultimate reward the reciprocal gaze of Madeline, awake as well as in sleep. That Keats should recognise the delicacy and fragility of relationship here might be typical of his surprising genius; just as typical, if even more surprising, is that he should load this spiritual and loving spectacle with such rich and lavish ore, that he should risk the monastic quiet with the plenitude of this:

And still she slept an azure-lidded sleep,
In blanched linen, smooth, and lavender'd,
While he from forth the closet brought a heap

Of candied apple, quince, and plum, and gourd;
 With jellies soother than the creamy curd,
 And lucent syrups, tinct with cinnamon;
 Manna and dates, in argosy transferr'd
 From Fez; and spiced dainties, every one,
 From silken Samarkand to cedar'd Lebanon.

These delicacies he heap'd with glowing hand
 On golden dishes and in baskets bright
 Of wreathed silver; sumptuous they stand
 In the retired quiet of the night,
 Filling the chilly room with perfume light.
 ('The Eve of St Agnes', xxix-xxx)

It is a brilliant passage, provided we can say that without concurring with the implications of Keats's self-denigrating comment about being 'cheated into some fine passages'.¹⁰ The brilliance resides not in any 'fine writing', but rather in Keats's extraordinary, wondrous ability to re-create with such physical fullness the sense of spiritual mutuality and repletion felt by the wondering Porphyro. This feast he brings is an offering, a token of humility and love. This sumptuousness is at one with the way, in the next stanza, 'Thus whispering, his warm, unnerved arm / Sank in her pillow', at one with his response when 'Her blue affrayed eyes wide open shone: / Upon his knees he sank, pale as smooth-sculptured stone', at one with the 'voluptuous accents' of the climactic stanza, where it is enough for Keats to glance at their 'solution sweet' before shifting with exquisite tact the angle of his vision, whilst the lovers with equal tact shift theirs.

Byron will have all of this, and yet will have none of it. Whereas Keats hangs poised 'like a throbbing star / Seen 'mid the sapphire heaven's deep repose', Byron hangs back, watching from the safer haven of the satirist. 'Distance is no object with me', he says in a letter, in that man-of-the-world tone that reveals unwittingly its more than worldly anxieties:¹¹ another instance of necessity claiming virtue for itself. We have here the same properties, but very different observations of proprieties. Whereas for Keats the intentness of the lovers' gaze works its own magic, which allows him to appeal without absurdity, but not without risk, to an exotic feast that could

have come straight from the wand of Prospero (and in Keats's rich imaginings probably did), for Byron there is no magic, and gaze and feast remain linked but separate. As so often in Byron's major poetry, we have been prepared for the two parts of the equation. How the two men looked in the slave market was crucial to their 'prospects', and how in turn they should be looked at, or 'eyed over':

No lady e'er is ogled by a lover,
Horse by a blackleg, broadcloth by a tailor,
Fee by a counsel, felon by a jailor,

As is a slave by his intended bidder.
(*Don Juan*, V.xxvi—xxvii)

It is a small jump from the sale to the thought of food, a kind of minor Popean hiccough:

And then the merchant giving change and signing
Receipts in full, began to think of dining.
(V.xxix)

The jump once made, Byron begins one of his famous 'digressions'. When he declares in a letter that 'Everything in this life depends upon the weather and the state of one's digestion', it might well seem a carelessly delivered *bon mot*;¹² but, as he acknowledges in *Don Juan*, he cherishes his own common-places, and insists that we cherish them too.

In that nonchalant manner that characterises the poem, Byron slips into a digression which has become, by the time he declares it as such ten stanzas later, no such thing: a crucial theme has been heralded, the connection between eating and mortality. To isolate this particular instance is to do the poem a disservice, but then that is true generally of Byron: we are always having to put the cart before the horse. It is worth noting at this point that 'those hungry Jacobins, the worms' of the next canto earn their keep by the reference both to *Hamlet* and to the rest of the poem. Such concentration would not, at this juncture, serve Byron's purpose, although within the compass of a handful of stanzas (which is how they seem, thrown off and at us, if we care to catch them) concentration is

very much of the essence. It is one of the small wonders of Byron's verse that he can effect such transformations, such alterations of pace.

I wonder if his appetite was good
 Or if it were, if also his digestion.
 (V.xxx)

This allows him to ponder the phenomenon of post-prandial (and hint at post-coital) gloom, in a stanza with its own personal poignancy when set against Byron's epistolary references to Alexander, his sense that in some way he is in the same line – he will, he says, 'be content to die the death of Alexander' when he has achieved his conquests.¹³

I think with Alexander that the act
 Of eating, with another act or two,
 Makes us feel our mortality in fact
 Redoubled. When a roast and a ragout
 And fish and soup, by some side dishes backed,
 Can give us either pain or pleasure, who
 Would pique himself on intellects, whose use
 Depends so much upon the gastric juice?
 (V.xxxii)

Byron summons up the idea of gross indulgence, without recreating it. Those dishes all have their covers on. He has, in fact, in the previous stanza, used the word 'repletion', the word I applied to a partial effect of 'The Eve of St Agnes'; but for Byron repletion is an abstract concept, important because it is precisely that, cool and withdrawn. There is, though, no false fastidiousness about his attitude. The abstractions serve his purpose admirably in a passage which turns upon the very value, or otherwise, of abstraction ('who', he says, after all, 'Would pique himself on intellects'?). To startle us into the realisation that the question at the end of that stanza is not rhetorical, Byron recounts a tale of a soldier being idly killed in the street, outside his window: thoughts of mortality, in other words, become more than thoughts when we are confronted with a corpse, after supper.¹⁴ Byron resorts to the verb he cannot avoid:

I gazed upon him, for I knew him well;
 And though I have seen many corpses, never
 Saw one, whom such an accident befell,
 So calm. Though pierced through stomach, heart, and
 liver,
 He seemed to sleep, for you could scarcely tell
 (As he bled inwardly, no hideous river
 Of gore divulged the cause) that he was dead;
 So as I gazed on him, I thought or said,

'Can this be death? Then what is life or death?
 Speak!' but he spoke not. 'Wake!' but still he slept.
 (V.xxxv-xxxvi)

There is a terrible fascination about the scene, the comingling of pain and pleasure that refuses to be unperplexed. The gaze is prolonged, and it is a gaze that has to be indulged. Much of Byron's poetry explores the ramifications of that stare.

Just how un-Keatsian it is emerges after the 'digression', when the newly bought slaves are themselves obsessed with hunger. The questions they ask of each other have all the urgency of people caught in a jam. Philosophising is not to the point, unless it be of the proverbial kind ('Tis therefore', significantly, 'better looking before leaping'). The important thing is to survive, to keep your wits about you. But for Byron that would be too easy: he needs to return to the ambiguities of digestion, and to keep before us the connection between that and mortality and seeing. As they approach the palace ('which opened on their view', again significantly), Byron's sleight of hand is such that we could well slide over the three words that condense that nexus of ideas – and to some extent he wants us to slide over them. Their effect is subliminal, and will surface three stanzas later.

And nearer as they came, a genial savour
 Of certain stews and roast meats and pilaus,
 Things which in *hungry mortals' eyes* find favour,
 Made Juan in his harsh intentions pause
 And put himself upon his good behaviour.
 His friend too, adding a new saving clause,

Said, 'In heaven's name let's get some supper now,
 And then I'm with you, if you're for a row.'
 (v.xlvii; emphasis added)

Again, Byron's appeal is to the idea of sights and smells, rather than to sights and smells as such. 'Genial savour' is indicative of the verse's tenor, rhyming literally and in terms of ethos with the 'good behaviour' it encourages. But the idea is by now filled out to the extent that it is not merely an idea; it has its own range of reference, an elegant precision that owes all to the movement of the verse and thought since that casual 'I wonder if his appetite was good' of stanza xxx. It has taken twenty stanzas to reach its climax, and it is typical of Byron that, should we pause to notice the climactic moment, we are left behind, because it is rare for him to acknowledge what he has achieved. At the risk of being left behind, we have no choice but to pause.

[They] smelt roast meat, beheld a huge fire shine,
 And cooks in motion with their clean arms bared,
 And gazed around them to the left and right
 With the prophetic eye of appetite.
 (v.l)

If we wanted to pinpoint a precise moment at which Byron's challenge to Keats was at its height, this would be it. To do so would be misleading, in that the episode continues, as the *seraglio* is entered, and described in that paradoxical fashion cultivated by Byron to throw us off our guard ('I won't describe', he declares, even though 'description is my forte'), leading up to the encounter with the mistress, and Don Juan's precarious, epicene defence against her warm advances, fuelled, as we might expect, by her dark eyes. There is much more to be said about this canto and the way in which its potentially Keatsian lushness is hinted at but always kept in control. But by this stage we have the necessary elements of the contrast. The feast and the gaze have been set before us.

It is that very careful placing which announces the Byronic distinctiveness. I said that the gaze and the feast were linked but separate, that Byron had no concern for the magical. The paradox of this couplet that invites us to pass our eyes back

over the first part of the canto, and forwards, prospectively ('prophetic') to the rest, is that it turns the tables on us, that it momentarily fuses the very things that it is apparently keeping apart, in that cool relationship that is for Byron not so much sanctuary from feeling as precaution against excess. Byron's path to the palace of wisdom is not Blake's. But at this point the startling fusion requires us to redefine our notions of Byronic detachment. The eye of appetite, hungry mortals' eyes, have become the hungry eyes of mortals, the eye wanting to consume what it gazes upon. The challenge to Keats is all the cheekier in that, at this point, we think of the melancholy lover 'feeding deep deep upon his mistress' eyes'. For a brief moment, Byron and Keats seem to be on the point of convergence, before going their separate ways. The possibility, though, is there, and we are, simultaneously, made to think of Wordsworth, and the terms he uses to discuss what he calls, in *The Prelude*, the 'tyranny of the eye'.

The Wordsworthian reference is worth pursuing, because Wordsworth so conciously outgrows 'the most despotic of our senses' even whilst admitting the sweet delights it held for him. He, too, finds himself talking in terms of greed and appetite. It is essential for him to refer to this time of his childhood, before he launches, in book XI, into the 'spots of time' passage where he is able to celebrate the imagination. It is as though he can only engage in that celebration at the expense of his early years:

Here only let me add that my delights
 (Such as they were) were sought insatiably,
 Though 'twas a transport of the outward sense,
 Not of the mind, vivid but not profound:
 Yet was I often greedy in the chase,
 And roamed from hill to hill, from rock to rock,
 Still craving combinations of new forms,
 New pleasure, wider empire for the sight,
 Proud of its own endowments, and rejoiced
 To lay the inner faculties asleep.

(*The Prelude* [1805], XI.186-95)

The terminology is that of 'Tintern Abbey', but the emotions less complex and contradictory:

The sounding cataract
 Haunted me like a passion: the tall rock,
 The mountain, and the deep and gloomy wood,
 Their colours and their forms, were then to me
 An appetite: a feeling and a love,
 That had no need of a remoter charm,
 By thought supplied, nor any interest
 Unborrowed from the eye.

(‘Tintern Abbey’, ll.76–83)

The shift from sight to sound is a sufficiently famous crux not to require amplification here, the way in which the eye is ‘made quiet by the power / Of harmony and the deep power of joy’ whereby ‘We see into the life of things’. But, as in all his great poems, things are never quite what they seem, or what he might wish, and Dorothy’s presence is a disturbing reminder of his own disturbance, however much of joy it might bring. She represents the very thing he has lost, and which he refuses here to mourn, as he is to refuse, less flexibly, in the ‘Immortality’ Ode. One of the most moving parts of the poem focuses on his gaze upon her, and he, perforce, resorts to the despotic claims of the eye. As he ‘catches’ the ‘language of his former heart’, he is himself caught, rather like the wedding-guest, pinned by the eye of the mariner:

[I] read
 My former pleasures in the shooting lights
 Of thy wild eyes. Oh! yet a little while
 May I behold in thee what I was once,
 My dear, dear Sister!

(‘Tintern Abbey’, ll.117–21)

It is a moment of intense poignancy in a poem that concentrates on this isthmus between past and future. Wordsworth lingers at the very point where the poem’s logic least demands it. He has talked about a blind man’s eye, he has talked about the body being laid asleep, he has begun to look ahead with what he thinks of as his inner, and superior, eye. Dorothy has been nowhere in sight: she has, so far as the poem is concerned, not existed. With his perverse form of truth and honesty, Wordsworth concentrates, suddenly, all of his ener-