

THE ROMANTIC CONCEALMENT OF DESIRE: COLERIDGE'S AND WORDSWORTH'S POETIC VOICES

Manuel Botero Camacho
Universidad Complutense de Madrid
mbotero@ucm.es

Received: 22 March 2021

Accepted: 9 September 2021

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21071/ltap.v6i6.14040>

Abstract

The present study poses an interpretation of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "The Eolian Harp" and William Wordsworth's "Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey" so as to evince the subject of desire as the ulterior motif of these texts, even though the poetic voices of these works attempt to conceal such a theme. This reading interprets both poems as compositions that share the same thematic line as William Blake's "The Book of Thel" and John Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn". Consequently, the close reading of the poems by Wordsworth and Coleridge will be presented.

Keywords: Coleridge, Wordsworth, romanticism, desire

OCULTAMIENTO ROMÁNTICO DEL DESEO: LAS VOCES POÉTICAS DE COLERIDGE Y DE WORDSWORTH

Resumen

El presente estudio plantea una interpretación de “El arpa éólica” de Samuel Taylor Coleridge y “Versos compuestos unas millas más arriba de Tintern Abbey” de William Wordsworth con la intención de evidenciar el tema del deseo como el motivo oculto de estos textos, aun cuando las voces poéticas de estas obras aparentemente intentan ocultar este tema. Esta lectura comprende ambos poemas como composiciones que comparten la misma línea temática que “El libro de Thel” de William Blake y “Oda a una urna griega” de John Keats. En consecuencia, se presentará la lectura detallada de los poemas de Wordsworth y Coleridge.

Palabras clave: Coleridge, Wordsworth, romanticismo, deseo

THE ROMANTIC CONCEALMENT OF DESIRE: COLERIDGE'S AND WORDSWORTH'S POETIC VOICES

Manuel Botero Camacho
Universidad Complutense de Madrid
mbotero@ucm.es

Introduction

Throughout these pages, an analysis of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "The Eolian Harp" and William Wordsworth's "Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey" will be proposed. Although both poems are usually approached from the angles of biography and the romantic veneration of Nature, this study poses the subject of desire as a connecting thread between them. This motif also concerns other key figures of this literary period, a fact that would reinforce the suggested reading of Coleridge's and Wordsworth's texts. Thus, in order to highlight the theme of desire as the ulterior motif of the poems' speakers over other traditional understandings, two other works will be briefly discussed in the introduction, William Blake's "The Book of Thel" and John Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn".

In "The Book of Thel", William Blake overtly exposes the theme of desire, since the name of its homonymous protagonist in Greek precisely means that, which poses Thel as a personification and a symbol of desire and reflects the poet's views on this feeling. Despite being the youngest of Seraphim's daughters, Thel is destined "To fade away like morning beauty from her mortal day:" (Blake 1988: 3, l. 3), a line that stresses the ephemerality of the feeling. This inconstancy is alluded again in the speaker's subsequent comparison of Thel with other ephemeral elements:

... a reflection in a glass; like shadows in the water.
Like dreams of infants. Like a smile upon an infant's face,
Like the dove's voice, like transient day, like music in the air;
(Blake 1988: 3, ll. 9-11)

Impermanence is further underlined in Thel's conversation with the Cloud, which recalls the sentence by Socrates that summarizes Heraclitus' statement that all things move and nothing remains (Plato 1963: 67), as part of the latter's doctrine of flux. The transience of desire stems from its

paradoxical nature, as it dies with its own fulfilment; in other words, the wish to satisfy one's longed for object, when fulfilled or achieved, leads the drive that originated it to its own destruction. This process is metaphorically analogous to Thel's ultimate purpose on life, to become food for worms once she perishes. In this premise, the paradox of desire is presented again as the fulfilment of Thel's purpose entails her dissolution. As Thel strolls through the underworld she finds her own grave. Sitting there, she hears a voice coming from it, one that could perfectly be her own once she (desire) is dead; one that moans about the senses as a source of corruption. Desire is a purely sensitive feeling that, once satisfied, exhausts such sensitivity, staining the wholeness of its purity, while the senses, after the banishment of desire, only perceive corruption, remorse and regret.

Albeit not enounced with the same openness, desire is explored by the speaker of John Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn", following a similar argumentative line than that of Thel that, in fact, offers a much clearer conclusion. This thematic line was neglected by some of the critics of the poem, for instance, Matthews, who considered the allusion to the "Piping Shepherds" a "pointless conceit" (1971: 162). Matthews' error resides in his oversight of the implications and significance of the piper's unheard melodies (Keats 1983: 114, l. 11). This melody refers to ideal music, to the archetype of music; an allusion that becomes evidently clear in the poem's maxim: "Beauty is truth, truth beauty, —that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know." (Keats 1983: 114, ll. 49-50) This motto is likewise the site of further critical blunders, as Gilfillan's declaration that Keats "seems to have been averse to all speculative thought" (1971: 306), a dismissive comment towards Keats' reasoning powers much in the same vein that Matthews' "[Keats'] fancy having thus got the better of his reason" (1971: 237).

Both critics seem to neglect the speaker's insistence in alluding to the Platonic doctrine that, arguably, is essential to the understanding of the poem and its rendering of Plato's ideals. As Wigod states, "More than any other of the odes, the implicit subject of the Ode on a Grecian Urn is the ideal itself (1957: 113). Archetypes are alluded in the poem not just in its straightforward mention to the gods of Arcady but in the purity of the urn's depiction. However, Keats' poem uses the doctrine of Platonic archetypes at his whim to ground a certain tautology. He sets up a direct relationship between truth and beauty, derived from the assertion that all which is beautiful or true is by definition archetypal. Truth is beauty since *it is*, and all that composes the being is true since the being is the only real entity,

unborn, immortal, immutable and simple: everything else is just a mere illusion. The trick is double as it consists, first, in establishing that if truth is beautiful, the beautiful has to be true (in absolute terms), and secondly, that after having constituted a similar relationship previously, one that equates beauty with desire through the speaker's comments on the lovers, then desire is truth and truth desire.

The urn is a symbol in and of itself, not only since it alludes to pagan rites or to spring—romantic symbol *par excellence*—but because desire is trapped in it, a craving that produces frustration. The urn, static and intact, offers to the lover one security at least: that of unfulfilled desire.

Bold lover, never, never canst thou kiss,
 Though winning near the goal – yet, do not grieve;
 She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,
 For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair! (Keats 1983: 114, ll. 17-20)

The fixed nature of the urn would allow the depicted lover to remain a suitor for eternity, always happy. The relations that are established at this point convey to the lover—and to the reader—that the former's beloved will remain beautiful since she will be young forever. Thus, youth equals beauty and due to the fact that she will remain so, he will eternally love her. In other words, only what is beautiful and young can be loved; there is no beauty nor love in old age. This is the type of transitive reasoning that the speaker offers.

More happy love! more happy, happy love!
 For ever warm and still to be enjoy'd,
 For ever panting, and for ever young; (Keats 1983: 114, ll. 25-27)

Love will always be eternal as long as desire is not satisfied; that is, similar to the form in “The Book of Thel”, it can only endure if unfulfilled. This is similar to Peter Levine's description of the romantic stance on love, which often suggested “that passion could only by sustained if time somehow stopped” (2002: 92). After its satiation the only sensation that remains is “a heart high-sorrowful and cloy'd, A burning forehead, and a parching tongue” (Keats 1983: 114, ll. 29-30). The line of argument that binds Blake and Keats' texts with the poems by Wordsworth and Coleridge is desire, one that drives men beyond their own moral convictions, even overriding their convictions in some cases. In fact, as Levine argues, the use of settings and mythology from Classical Rome and Greece by Keats and

other romantics precisely responds to their desire to pursue the celebration of the ideal of Beauty as independent of morality (2002: 85-86). In Blake's poem melancholy can be identified; in Coleridge and Wordsworth, their speakers experienced qualms and even a slight feeling of bitter remorse; but Keats' narrator shows no moral reform, no reluctance.

Perhaps the only doubt that such an audacious poem awakens is whether, when mentioning the sacrifice (Keats 1983: 115, ll. 31-34), the narrator is also referring to marriage. If the sacrificial altar equates compromise, in the case of the romantic man it would represent the death of liberty for the sake of satisfying desire.

Coleridge

The poem "The Eolian Harp" (1796/1973) has been the object of multiple interpretations, for instance that which sees the harp as a metaphor of the romantic heart and the characteristics that a true poet must exhibit; a more traditional standpoint in that it serves the purpose of establishing a symbolic image that will be pursued in different texts and periods of Romanticism. The present reading intends to uncover some of the concealed characteristics that the true romantic poet does not usually reveal.

The common theories about the poem draw upon biographical data for the deciphering of the work's interpretative elements, despite their futility. Written in 1795 and published a year later, the poem portrays Coleridge's expectations concerning his wedding with Sara Fricker, addressing the pleasures of marital love—in a conversational form—but diverting from said dimension and evolving into a poem that deals with the relationship between mankind and nature. The traditional standpoint refers as well to the object that gives name to the composition, explaining its physical and symbolic characteristics. Metaphysical interpretations generally mention a pantheism or an intimate relationship between the poet and Nature—in this case capitalized—and the search for the Divinity through the natural elements (Abrams 1971: 434, Holmes 1982: 104, Ashton 1997: 107). Strangely enough, these interpretations resemble closely those made about "Tintern Abbey".

The conversation between the speaker and Sara is apparently innocent, but a more perverse interpretation can be glimpsed if the poem is approached from the romantic understanding of desire deployed in poems like "The Book of Thel" and "Ode on a Grecian Urn". The poetic voice finds himself on the brink of a new life, at the end of the race that led him to obtain the object of his desire. He is in a spot which, according to romantic

rhetoric, couldn't be more ideal; however, something disturbs him. One of the principles of Romanticism, enunciated in the *Lyrical Ballads*, proposes that "poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" (Wordsworth and Coleridge 1911: 228), which is impossible since, as Locke among others defended (Russell 1972: 604-617), the "transcription" of emotion into a language understandable to others forces it to lose its spontaneity, its authenticity and veracity. On the contrary, if emotions were not codified into the imperfect and artificial machine of language, it would be impossible to communicate them. This has always left the romantic poet in a state of incomprehension by the rest of his fellow beings. The poet assumes the part of the misunderstood party, facing a disjunction regarding close relationships: either he manages to deceive his interlocutor, in which case he would gain the other's approval, affection and even love; or he is unable to do so. In the first instance the interlocutor would lose the poet's respect and, therefore, cannot be the object of love; whereas in the second context, the interlocutor would have been able to see through the poet's mask and in no case would be able to love him, and might even end up despising him. This situation in which he is immersed in either case leaves the poet again in the role of the victim, which provides him with enjoyment but does not satisfy his desire. Sooner or later, the romantic poet would want to satiate his cravings even if this implies, as usually, to sacrifice his rhetoric.

Once this situation has taken place, the poet would resort to his eloquence, trying to blame his victim by shielding himself in the idea of being a free spirit, in his unique capacity to understand reality better than mere mortals and in his impossibility of changing. In order to remain an "honour'd Maid" (Coleridge 1973: 102. 65), it is safe to assume that Sara has rejected the poet's sexual advances, and the poet, thwarted, has come to the veranda to watch the sunset, while she seats by his side.

My pensive Sara! thy soft cheek reclined
 Thus on mine arm, most soothing sweet it is
 To sit beside our Cot, our Cot o'ergrown
 With white-flower'd Jasmin, and the broad-leav'd Myrtle,
 (Meet emblems thy of Innocence and Love!) (Coleridge 1973: 100, ll. 1-5)

In this first part there is already a distancing between the poet and his lover, perhaps even bitterness, since he feels compelled to explain to her the things they are observing. Such explanation is made evident due to the use of parentheses, in the manner of air quotes, and by the use of the word

rejection would eventually turn into consent will generate a delightful wrong. At first, like the lute, she will present herself as shy, but with a minimal sign of consent this initial flirtation will turn into the consummation of desire. The introduction of the concept “tempt to repeat the wrong” reinforces the substantiation of the proposed speculations. One might wonder why the interaction between the wind and instrument would be considered wrong; this only makes sense if these lines are predicated on the new dimension created by the metaphor, once it has overcome its literal meaning.

Such a soft floating witchery of sound
 As twilight Elfins make, when they at eve
 Voyage on gentle gales from Fairy-Land,
 Where Melodies round honey-dripping flowers,
 Footless and wild, like birds of Paradise, (Coleridge 1973: 101, ll. 21-25)

This passage might seem rather obscure for the interpretations that defend the love for simplicity, as it distances itself from all that is natural and ordinary. However, it makes sense if understood as the poet’s attempt to force the conversation into the grounds of romantic pose by drawing his lover’s attention to these pleasing images. On the one hand, he is insisting that she should listen, and thus, remain silent; and on the other hand, he is starting to speak in wildly imaginative and unusual, if not incomprehensible, terms to her. The last assertion can be deduced from the speaker’s previously mentioned arrogant assumptions, in which his explanation of the symbology of flowers suggests that Sara’s knowledge of the realm of fairies and elves is fairly limited. What corroborates his selfishness—and his desire to remain misunderstood—is that in this case he does not attempt to justify it, not even in a condescending manner as he did at the beginning of the poem. The intricacy of this baffling speech serves to hide from Sara a very cryptic sentence: “O! the one Life within us and abroad” (Coleridge 1973: 101, l. 27). Here, the reader beholds the revelation of the truth concealed in the narrator’s discourse even when Sara seems unaware or unwilling to react to it. The line suggests that the poet is not completely content with the current state of affairs. He recognizes that he has two lives, the inner and the outer, a condition that exposes his duplicity. But far from saying it for showing contrition, he states it carelessly as if it was a condition of which one can or should be proud, or at least, as nothing that should cause embarrassment.

O! the one Life within us and abroad,
 Which meets all motion and becomes its soul,
 . . . Methinks, it should have been impossible
 Not to love all things in a world so fill'd;
 Where the breeze warbles, and the mute still air
 Is Music slumbering on her instrument. (Coleridge 1973: 101, ll. 27-34)

The insulence is made evident as he talks with self-confidence and passion about his own duality, going a step forward: he might be introducing another confession, one that may point to infidelity. This can be interpreted in several forms: either he has been unfaithful already or, in accordance to the romantic and poetic nature of a free spirit, he would cheat on his lover sooner or later. Another option results from the reading of the poet's frustration, voicing a veiled threat that suggests that he has alternatives in mind if she continues to reject his advances. One of the cultural traits of love, in this case romantic (though the limits of the term are not distinct), is its character of exclusivity, that is, if one loves a person in such a way one cannot feel the same towards anyone else. In that sense, love and fidelity go hand in hand. At this point we should not consider that the loved one is different from the desired one. In concordance with the tradition in which the poet is included, neither the feeling of love nor the acts consequently derived from it should be shared with someone different than the loved one. Therefore, if the poet, in an attempt to incite Sara to jealousy, confesses to her that he usually thinks that it should have been impossible "Not to love all things in a world so fill'd" (Coleridge 1973: 101, l. 32), it is possible that she will be inclined to yield completely.

And thus, my Love! as on the midway slope
 Of yonder hill I stretch my limbs at noon,
 Whilst through my half-clos'd eye-lids I behold
 The sunbeams dance, like diamonds, on the main.
 And tranquil muse upon tranquillity;
 Full many a thought uncall'd and undetain'd,
 And many idle flitting phantasies,
 Traverse my indolent and passive brain,
 As wild and various as the random gales
 That swell and flutter on this subject Lute!
 (Coleridge 1973: 101-102, ll. 35-44)

Although the section starts by addressing Sara as his "Love", he makes it clear that he prefers solitude, being the only state in which he can find the

peace and tranquillity he yearns for. Analogous to the effect produced by the repetition of the words which allude to silence, the alliteration “tranquil muse upon tranquillity” manifests that it is an element worthy of consideration. In that moment of reflection, the poet would want to be left alone, but Sara’s presence encourages him to continue talking about himself, as he finally compares his poetic self with the harp. In this comparison he discharges himself from all responsibility: if he is merely a passive instrument, he would have no control over the consequences that an “intellectual breeze” may foster; it presents him as innocent of such thoughts, and of the actions performed under their influence.

And what if all of animated nature
 Be but organic Harps diversely framed,
 That tremble into thought, as o’er them sweeps
 Plastic and vast, one intellectual breeze,
 At once the Soul of each, and God of All?

But thy more serious eye a mild reproof
 Darts, O belovéd Woman! nor such thoughts
 Dim and unhallow’d dost thou not reject,
 And biddest me walk humbly with my God. (Coleridge 1973: 102, ll. 45-53)

At this moment it seems that the poetic voice crosses a line that does not please Sara, as he has gone too far to unburden himself from guilt by pretending to project his personal condition upon the rest of mankind, by placing the responsibility of men’s actions into the abstract “intellectual breeze” and by almost committing a heresy as a result of establishing a correspondence between that breeze and God. However, there is another implication in Sara’s reaction. The speaker has described the harp as a coy mistress that progressively yields to the advances as the subtle pressure of the wind traverses across it. The fact that the poet invokes the harp again, this time encompassing everyone, automatically includes Sara as well, thus identifying her directly with the aforementioned sexualized harp. This could be understood as another approach by the unsatisfied poet to bend his lover’s will to his desires. An invitation to abandon her coyness and yield so that, by letting herself become the passive harp, they can eventually produce that beautiful music. Sara’s understanding of the devious method accounts for her disapproving look:

Meek Daughter in the family of Christ!
 . . . For never guiltless may I speak of him,
 The Incomprehensible! save when with awe
 I praise him, and with Faith that inly feels;
 Who with his saving mercies healéd me,
 A sinful and most miserable man,
 Wilder'd and dark, and gave me to possess
 Peace, and this Cot, and thee, heart-honour'd Maid!
 (Coleridge 1973: 102, ll. 54, 59-65)

Before Sara's rebuke, the poet retracts and seems to apologise for his statements, attempting to calm Sara. However, there is another reproach hidden in his comments that these thoughts are not entirely unfamiliar to her, but as she is a "Meek Daughter in the family of Christ!" it is her duty to lead him once again to the fold. Said remark does not only criticise her docility and obedience but also suggests that she is not being completely honest. Immediately he chastises himself, stating that he is the miserable possessor of a vain philosophy and an un-regenerated mind; however, this cannot be but an ironic comment, since he has exposed his theory and seems pleased with it. Under this perspective the last lines are turned into lines of false gratitude, full of contempt, bitterness and tiredness. Such idea might be reinforced by the absence of capitalization of the pronoun "him" (twice) and the possessive "his" when referring to Christ.

Wordsworth

Countless pages have been written about William Wordsworth's "Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey" (1798/1969). The interpretations of the poem usually focus on three objectives, which in multiple occasions are superimposed. The most common one is limited to describing what is related in the poem with no real symbolic elucidation. Remembering his days of youth, Wordsworth laments the impossibility to describe accurately what he was then and recalls the poem's specific site as a mixture of feeling and passion untainted by maturity and the knowledge of the world—understood as the combination of pain, apathy and cynicism derived from aging. However, the narrator strives to maintain that a mature age and its wisdom compensate for the innocence lost. Said reparation has been granted by having attained a profound sense of the understanding of nature, and for some authors at this point there can be already found a pantheism or theology, or an understanding between the poet and God (Beatty 1922: 97, Barth 2003). Against this rendition there could be

presented an objection, when indicating that the reference to the abbey could have a meaning in combination with the fact that the building is never mentioned in the poem. Readers must consider why the “lines” are not written in the abbey itself but a “few miles above” (Wordsworth 1969: 259).

The second objective centers particularly on the poem’s origin,¹ the specific circumstances of the journey and the company of travelers, a reading that does not require any critical bibliography, as the necessary documents that verify Wordsworth’s visit—along with his sister—to the described zone are indeed available. Critics congratulate themselves when they corroborate said biographical fact, which appears as the title’s appendix, is true; becoming exultant when, by the end of the poem, the lines immediately can be associated with Dorothy, his sister. This type of reading often includes references to Wordsworth’s previous visit to the abbey, only five years before. Likewise, information concerning the poet’s private life or certain facts about British or world history are used to justify a proposal concerning the poem’s first lines.

A third approach concentrates on different formal aspects: for instance, in reference to the debate between the poem’s identification with an ode or with a conversational poem; if the arrangement of the poem as part of the volume of *Lyrical Ballads* is intentional, if it was written deliberately for said publication or not. These elements do not contribute in any form to the analysis here posed. However, the reader should know that in some cases said approach may be used to the extent that it sheds light upon the poem’s interpretative elements.

A fourth interpretation establishes the narrator not as a worshiper of Nature in a metaphysical sense as the Godhead, but as an admirer of nature in its most physical form. Considering the insight on the manner in which Blake’s and Coleridge’s poems deal with desire, a second reading of Wordsworth’s work, in which the initial interpretations may have been understood and rejected, can lead us to a different reading of the poem, which reveals unexpected turns in the poet’s narration. In the case of “Tintern Abbey” the references are more elaborated than those of Coleridge. The reader is once again required to remain oblivious of biographical references—which in this case greatly diminishes the poem’s

¹ In “The Frontiers of Criticism”, T. S. Eliot warns the reader and critic of poetry against the tendency to assume that a poem only has a single and valid meaning (1990: 113) and to believe that one can understand a poem merely by tracing its biographical or literary origins (1990: 114).

interpretation—as it is necessary to consider the possibility that the words “Friend” or “Sister” (both capitalized) do not refer to Wordsworth’s sister (Wordsworth 1969: 262, ll. 118-119, 124). If the analysis proposed is upheld without this consideration, the reader might even find hints to an incestuous relationship.²

The first stanza (Wordsworth 1969: 259-260. 1-22) does not seem to offer more variations on this interpretation than on those more popular and valued that speak of the poet of nature. Beyond the exaggeration, already commented in the rhetoric of the life that supposes the disproportionate suffering inflicted in the poet by the passing of time—as much as by what cannot be recovered as by the duration of long period passed—it is not essential to corroborate Wordsworth’s journey along the banks of the Wye. A reflection composed by the last three lines of the first part is significant, in that it creates a connection with Coleridge’s poem; similarly to how the poet of “The Eolian Harp” yearns for a contemplative solitude in the mountains, the poet of “Tintern Abbey” is diverted from his narrative course to advance a relation with the lonely hermit.

But oft, 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,
And passing even into my purer mind
With tranquil restoration: —feelings too
Of unremembered pleasure; such, perhaps,
As may have had no trivial influence
On that best portion of a good man’s life; (Wordsworth 1969: 260, ll. 26-34)

The reflection with which this fragment begins directly addresses memory, as the poet talks of the remembrances dear to him. These thoughts appear during night-time, in the loneliness of empty rooms and in the hours of weariness so as to provide him respite and satisfaction. Regarding the theme and nature of such memories, the reading of the poem focused on

² Incest between siblings has been identified as a recurrent and significant theme in the English Romanticism (Richardson 1985: 738). In the works of Romantic poets, this motif usually concludes “with a death that divides the siblings, a death related to the consummation . . . of their love” (Richardson 1985: 740). Beyond the realm of fiction, Bateson suggested the existence of incestuous feelings between Wordsworth and his sister Dorothy (1960: 153-162).

nature offers an explanation in the natural environments that oppose the industrial cities that romantics so despised.

His little, nameless, unremembered acts
 Of kindness and of love. Nor less, I trust,
 To them I may have owed another gift,
 Of aspect more sublime; that blessed mood,
 In which the burthen of the mystery,
 In which the heavy and the weary weight
 Of all this unintelligible world
 Is lighten'd: (Wordsworth 1969: 260, ll. 35-42)

However, there is a slight distinction in the essence of these remembrances that points to a different direction. There are some small acts of love, without name or possibility to be remembered, that should not have relevance in the life of a good man, and those owed to a more significant present that lighten the weight of the tedious world. The former are of unremembered pleasure, probably referring to one-night stands, women whose names he does not remember. The latter are of sublime character, probably referring to more significant relationships. The narrator is reminiscing about acts of physical enjoyment, evoked in his urban solitude and in whose recreation he finds entertainment, as a form of self-satisfaction.

— that serene and blessed mood,
 In which the affections gently lead us on, —
 Until, the breath of this corporeal frame,
 And even the motion of our human blood
 Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
 In body, and become a living soul:
 While with an eye made quiet by the power
 Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
 We see into the life of things. (Wordsworth 1969: 260, ll. 42-50)

The acts of sublime nature are depicted as a relief that resembles an orgasm, since the burden is lessened and one reaches the clarity of “that serene and blessed mood”; but the other ones are not less pleasurable to him, the small and nameless acts that produce “sensations sweet /Felt in the blood and felt along the heart” (Wordsworth 1969: 260). If this interpretation is accepted, both the kind-hearted deeds—and their remembrance as the gift of sublime essence—and the intimate meetings

could be interpreted, alongside the rest of the poem, as a confirmation that the poet's coveted past is a period of sexual character.

If this
 Be but a vain belief, yet, oh! how oft —
 In darkness, and amid the many shapes
 Of joyless daylight; when the fretful stir
 Unprofitable, and the fever of the world,
 Have hung upon the beatings of my heart —
 How oft, in spirit, have I turned to thee
 O sylvan Wye! Thou wanderer through the wood
 How often has my spirit turned to thee!
 (Wordsworth 1969: 260-261, ll. 511-59)

The previous fragment, despite diverting the interpreter's attention by mentioning, once again, the river as an element of nature, subscribes the idea that in the darkness of the city the poet resorts to what he names "unprofitable stir". The cunning of hiding his intention consists, perhaps, not only in using a metaphor to represent his "acts of love" as natural phenomena, but also in synthesizing them and the natural environment where they were performed in a hypallage. In this way, the possible sexual meaning of the poem is concealed, enabling the author to declare his innocence in the case of being accused.

The picture of the mind revives again:
 While here I stand, not only with the sense
 Of present pleasure, but with pleasing thoughts
 That in this moment there is life and food
 For future years (Wordsworth 1969: 261, ll. 63-67)

These lines deal, yet again, with the reminiscence of past pleasures, but also reveal the existence of enjoyment in the present. The use of metonymy has been recurrent by equating pleasure with "that which provides it", a superimposition of rhetorical figures is what hinders the discernment of the poem's dark framework. It is here where it becomes evident that the poet is addressing or referring to someone, an individual that usually is inferred to be his sister, but it is also possible to be otherwise.

. . . when like a roe
 I bounded . . .
 Wherever nature led;

. . . For nature then
 (The coarser pleasures of my boyish days,
 And their glad animal movements all gone by,
 To me was all in all. . . (Wordsworth 1969: 261, ll. 69-77)

Now the metaphor is conspicuously presented, his young self is compared with the roe; the zeal and eagerness with which the desired object is pursued; the immaturity that might explain why five years are so relevant; the coarse and rude pleasures of youth; the animal motions, now exhausted, that concentrated all his interest.

. . . 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, (Wordsworth 1969: 261, ll. 78-82)

In the lines, read under this light, there can be found in the descriptions of nature some nuances that subtly present sexual overtones, some of the most evident ones including “the deep and gloomy wood” and the “sounding cataract”; the kind of metaphors that can later be found in the third canto of Byron’s “Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage” (34-36).

. . . — That time is past,
 And all its aching joys are now no more,
 And all its dizzy raptures. Not for this
 Faint I, . . . other gifts
 Have followed, for such loss, I would believe,
 Abundant recompense. . . .
 . . . And I have felt
 . . . A motion and a spirit, that impels
 All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
 And rolls through all things.
 (Wordsworth 1969: 261-262, ll. 85-90, 95-104)

Now it is the time of maturity, of accepting that the years of passion have passed as claimed by the narrator, who in spite of losing youth’s “dizzy raptures” and its “aching joys” has received abundant rewards. However, what he now describes as a reward neither seems to be positive nor appears to compensate the loss of the wonders described up to this moment in the narration. This acceptance of his future destiny, of his

serenity, recalls the final thought of “The Eolian Harp”, in which there seems to be more sarcasm than true happiness or gratitude. Perhaps the poetic voice has finally settled, even got married, and now laments the freedom lost; or the speaker, in spite of being committed or engaged to someone, still yields from time to time to youthful dalliances and, perhaps, this new meeting, disguised by nature and sheltered by the affirmation of his sister’s presence, is illicit. Regardless of the accuracy of the previous scenarios, if the connection with the “Harp” still appears to be weak, an incontestable reference to Coleridge’s poem is made when he states to have felt “A presence that disturbs me with the joy” a “motion and a spirit, that impels/ All thinking things...” This is a distinct allusion to the “intellectual breeze” that bestowed upon Coleridge’s speaker letters of marque for his unfaithfulness.

. . . Therefore am I still
 A lover of the meadows and the woods,
 And mountains; and of all that we behold
 From this green earth; of all the mighty world
 Of eye and ear, both what they half-create,
 And what perceive; well pleased to recognize
 In nature and the language of the sense,
 The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,
 The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul
 Of all my moral being. (Wordsworth 1969: 262, ll. 104-113)

In a moment of audacity or of profound honesty he confesses to himself to be a lover of all the things that he previously claimed to have rejected. In addition, and similar to Coleridge’s speaker, he admits that all those feelings—acquired through the senses—however imperfect they might be, still constitute his moral compass. Outside of the offered interpretation, references to Descartes are evident in two lines: “All thinking things” (*res cogitans*) and “Therefore am I...” (*ego ergo sum*), as well as the notion of the lack of reliability that the senses provide concerning the perception of reality, which, as a whole, point out that these might not be accidental.

For thou art with me, here, upon the banks
 Of this fair river; thou, my dearest Friend,
 My dear, dear Friend, and in thy voice I catch
 The language of my former heart, and 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! And this prayer I make,
 Knowing that Nature never did betray
 The heart that loved her; (Wordsworth 1969: 262, ll. 117-126)

At this point the reader that has followed the present interpretative line faces two possibilities: either to believe that the word “Sister” refers, indeed, to the speaker’s sister, or that it is used in a more ecumenical sense. The reading here opts for the second option but does not reject that the first might be possible. The poetic voice resumes using Nature to justify the acts he is suggesting his companion to engage in.

. . . ’tis her privilege,
 Through all the years of this our life, to lead
 From joy to joy: for she can so inform
 The mind that is within us, so impress
 With quietness and beauty, and so feed
 With lofty thoughts, that neither evil tongues,
 Rash judgments, nor the sneers of selfish men,
 Nor greetings where no kindness is, nor all
 The dreary intercourse of daily life,
 Shall e’er prevail against us, or disturb
 Our cheerful faith that all which we behold
 Is full of blessings. (Wordsworth 1969: 262-263, ll. 126-137)

The conversation is now fully disclosed and, when addressing his friend, it is evident that there is something that might be considered wrong in what they are doing. On the one hand, the narrator attempts to justify the fact that those feelings are right; if that were the case, he would not need to demonstrate their propriety. On the other hand, the speaker advises his sister to disregard the judgments that he expects to receive for finding in her his former pleasures—identified as immature and gross—and for using nature as an excuse for his actions, since doing so would provide a context where the encounters fuelled by desire can take place, enabling them to go from joy to joy, from pleasure to pleasure.

And let the misty mountain-winds be free
 To blow against thee: and in after years,
 When these wild ecstasies shall be matured
 Into a sober pleasure, when thy mind
 Shall be a mansion for all lovely forms,

Thy memory be as a dwelling-place
 For all sweet sounds and harmonies; oh! then,
 (Wordsworth 1969: 263, ll. 139-145)

The narrator urges his friend to yield to the pleasures that he remembers from his youth, predicting good fortune if she decides to act irresponsibly and carelessly. He also affirms that, when older, she will find the memories resulting from those actions satisfying; adding, in a melancholic and gloomy demeanour, that if she finds herself desperate or sombre in the future she only needs to reminisce about these moments that will procure her joy and solace, as much as they comfort him in the loneliness of the city.

If solitude, or fear, or pain, or grief,
 Should be thy portion, with what healing thoughts
 Of tender joy wilt thou remember me,
 And these my exhortations! Nor, perchance,
 . . . wilt thou then forget
 That on the banks of this delightful stream
 We stood together; And that I, so long
 A worshipper of Nature, hither came,
 Unwearied in that service: rather say
 With warmer love, oh! with far deeper zeal
 Of holier love. (Wordsworth 1969: 263, ll. 146-158)

In the case that she is a friend or a lover to-be, it seems as if the speaker, with the intention of seducing her, is attempting to convince her that it is right to surrender to passion. Under this perspective his previous advices and comforting suggestions now show his arrogance, as he identifies the memories' relief with what they have done and the places where she has been with him; mitigating it by stating that, even for a life-time adorer of nature, the landscape is now more beautiful thanks to her presence. The alternative option, and without incurring in speculations regarding incest (this would not alter the analysis performed up to this point), presents a narrator that offers counsel to his sister, encouraging her to be freer, to have lovers, and to heedfully disregard the judgments, mannerisms and fashions of society. If this scenario is correct, it can be considered odd that a brother would confide to his companion that which he does in the darkness of the city, recommending that she creates memories that will allow her to do the same in the future. Lastly, it is not very convincing that he would say to her

that, in those future moments that he foreshadows, she should think of him concerning these juvenile pleasures.

Conclusion

The present study has proposed a reading of Coleridge's "The Eolian Harp" and Wordsworth's "Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey" that depart from the canonical interpretations, which have mostly focused on the biographical facts surrounding the composition and the poets' praise of Nature, central to the poetics of Romanticism. Instead, the analysis has attempted to provide an alternative reading in both cases that highlights the articulation of the theme of desire by the poetic voices of each composition. The significance of such thematic line for the English Romanticism has been explored in the introduction through the reference and brief commentary of two additional texts composed by key figures of the period, William Blake and John Keats. The interaction between the ideas concerning desire deployed in "The Book of Thel" and "Ode on a Grecian Urn" enable us to reflect upon the tension that exist between the ephemerality of desire, especially once it is satisfied, and the endurance of an ideal that can never be achieved or fulfilled; this is precisely what informs the anxiety Coleridge's poetic voice towards the stability of a committed relationship.

In "The Eolian Harp", the conversational pattern of the poem masks under the rhetoric of the romantic poet the speaker's sexual advances towards his lover. The ingenuity of the poetic voice progressively emerges as he conceives various arguments for her beloved to finally yield to him. The poet resorts to various strategies deployed in successive (and apparently unsuccessful) attempts, being the most significant of them the conceit in which both he and his lover are rendered as instruments that will only unlock their most beautiful melodies when played by an external agent. Serving as an invitation for Sara to respond positively to his advances but also as an excuse for his own behavior as he presents himself as a passive entity whose feelings, thoughts and desires are the product of an external all-encompassing force. When his arguments exceed the limits of moral propriety, he assumes a self-deprecating guise in the attempt to appease his beloved, rejecting his transgressive ideas in an act that cannot but come as disingenuous; a superficial and dishonest repentance in which his arrogance and frustrated desire transpire.

In a similar fashion, the poetic voice of "Tintern Abbey" resorts to the praise of Nature to disguise a celebration of the sexual dalliances of his

youth, reveling in the memories of those episodes years afterwards. The poem, also designed as a conversation or confession, renders this process of remembrance and the events recollected as an attempt to either recommending the same course of action to his sister or, like in the proposed reading of Coleridge's poem, convincing a possible sexual partner to satisfy his desire.

Works Cited

- Abrams, M. H. (1971). *The Mirror and the Lamp*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- (1973). *Natural Supernaturalism. Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Ashton, Rosemary (1997). *The Life of Samuel Taylor Coleridge: A Critical Biography*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Barth, J. Robert (2003). *Romanticism and Transcendence: Wordsworth, Coleridge, and the Religious*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press.
- Bateson, F. W. (1960). *Wordsworth: A Re-interpretation*. London: Longman.
- Beatty, Arthur (1922). *William Wordsworth, His Doctrine and Art in their Historical Relations*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Blake, William (1988). "The Book of Thel." In David V. Erdman (ed.). *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*. New York: Anchor Books, 3-6.
- Byron, George Gordon (1913). *Childe Harold, Cantos III and IV, The Prisoner Of Chillon and Other Poems*. New York: Henry Holt and Company. *Archive.org*. Web, 25 Sept 2009. URL: <https://archive.org/details/byronschilderhar01craigooq/page/n70/mode/2up>. Last access 16 Aug 2021.
- Coleridge, Samuel Taylor (1973). "The Eolian Harp." In Ernest Hartley Coleridge (ed.). *Coleridge: Poetical Works*. London: Oxford University Press, 100-106.
- Descartes, René (1975). *Meditaciones Metafísicas*. Buenos Aires: Aguilar.
- Eliot, T. S. (1990). "The Frontiers of Criticism." In *On Poetry and Poets*. London: Faber & Faber.
- Gilfillan, George (1971). "John Keats." In G. M. Mathews (ed.). *Keats: The Critical Heritage*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Limited, 302-307.
- Holmes, Richard (1982). *Coleridge*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Keats, John. (1983). "Ode on a Grecian Urn." In Hellen Vendler (ed.). *The Odes of John Keats*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 114-115.
- Levine, Peter (2002). "Keats against Dante: The Sonnet on Paolo and Francesca". *Keats-Shelley Journal* 51: 76-93.
- Mathews, G. M. (ed.) 1971. *Keats: The Critical Heritage*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Limited.
- Plato (1963). "Cratylus." In T. E. Page *et al.* (eds.). *Plato*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 7-91.

- Richardson, Alan (1985). "The Dangers of Sympathy: Sibling Incest in English Romantic Poetry". *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 25. 4: 737-754
- Russell, Bertrand (1972). *The History of Western Philosophy*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Wigod, Jacob D. (1957). "Keats Ideal in The *Ode on a Grecian Urn*". *PMLA* 72.1: 113-121.
- Wordsworth, William (1969). "Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey". In E. De Selincourt (ed.). *Poetical Works*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 259-263.
- Wordsworth, William and Coleridge, Samuel Taylor (1911). *Lyrical Ballads*. London: Henry Frowde. *Archive.org*. Web 29 Oct 2007. URL: <https://archive.org/details/lyricalballads00wordiala> Last access 16 Aug 21.