



**HAL**  
open science

# Sheer Difference, or, Mining Mental Prospects in Lyrical Ballads(1798)

Thomas Dutoit

► **To cite this version:**

Thomas Dutoit. Sheer Difference, or, Mining Mental Prospects in Lyrical Ballads(1798). *Orbis Litterarum*, 2014, Romanticism and Memory, 69 (2), pp.171-192. 10.1111/oli.12056 . hal-01127714

**HAL Id: hal-01127714**

**<https://hal.univ-lille.fr/hal-01127714>**

Submitted on 9 Mar 2015

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Sheer Difference, or, Mining Mental Prospects in *Lyrical Ballads* (1798)  
 Thomas Dutoit, Université de Lille 3

For Marc Porée

Or. And? No. Or. Or includes and. And/or. Sheering already. Mind this “or.” Mine this “ore.” Mine, this “or”? No, “or” never belongs. “Or” does not *pertain*. The pertinence of “or” is that it shares: it divides. “Or” is the “sheer difference” we share and that shears us, sheering us off course. Of course. Whose course? Mine, or his? Which his? Teachers of a course. *Lyrical Ballads, de Wordsworth et Coleridge. La différence en partage*, this breath-taking book, is also the course written by Denis Bonnecase and Marc Porée. Porous difference, that they share, that shore them as each wrote from his respective shore.<sup>1</sup> Explore only the veins of this course rich in wordly, and mental, prospects.

Or.

Or. Or. Wordsworth has two. Only two? Is “or” only two? How many “or’s” in Wordsworth, in *Lyrical Ballads*, to begin? Inexhaustible vein.

The destination is the mine. To mine the mine. Mined. Mind. Mental. I’m taking “mental prospects” as of the mind, as in the mind, as to be mined in the mind, the mind as a mine, but that does not mean as my mind, as mine, but as something to be prospected, foraged.

I translate *La différence en partage* less as *Shared Difference* than as *Sheer Difference*. In sheer as *partage*, as participation, there is, certainly, “share,” which obviously denotes the scissors, the “shear” or “shearing” requisite for “sharing.” Share. Shear. Sheer warp? “Sheer” already means a lot: “sheer” is a synonym for “perpendicular,” “steep,” and “to sheer” is to rise or descend vertically, very steeply, from the shore. We are therefore sheer with, smack in front of, all those cliffs in Wordsworth, for example in the boat stealing episode of *The Prelude* when “I dipped my oars.”<sup>2</sup> Must try to avoid a crash landing in this attempted flight, this *vol*, I hope I will be “sheer,” in its sense of “not guilty”; “sheer” also means “absolutely” (used especially with verbs denoting cleavage and separation); “sheer” is used of a blow, as in a sheer blow; of immaterial things, as in sheer mind; “sheer” is transparent, as in sheer textiles. As verb, “sheer” also means “to turn aside, alter its direction, swerve to one side or another”; to “sheer” is to curve, and as a noun, it is a nautical term: “sheer” denotes the curvature of a deck or bulwarks of a vessel. It is the curvature, for

example, of a rowboat. A “sheer” in sailing is a “swerve,” and as verb, is to change one’s course, to depart, go away, into a new direction: to change tack. In trying to mine – to undermine, to exploit, to explore by burrowing through; but also to make mine, to appropriate – *La différence en partage*, their reading of *Lyrical Ballads*, there will be a constant risk of “sheering-off”: breaking from one’s course. After all, their book is the template for all courses in France on *Lyrical Ballads*. “Sheering” is, basically, bad steering, for it is when one is unable to hold or walk or sail on a line.

“Sheer difference,” then, is to bend difference, to take it off line, to turn difference into something other than itself, other than being other. If two people were related by sheer difference, then they’d be identical. Because absolute difference would mean to share absolutely nothing in common, but then, if each is radically incomparable, then both are equal in that incommensurable measure. All pleasure is the experience of this impossible measure.

The mental prospects given to readers in *La différence en partage* are innumerable; in this study, I shall explore only one, under the heading of what I call “flowereason,” in the wake of what Bonnecase and Porée refer to as *floraison* (DP 51). Through a reading of parts of their book, but also of *Lyrical Ballads*, we wish to show how a Mallarmean poetics is, *avant la lettre*, operating in these poems. Confounding the temporality of literary history, this poetics requires a reading memory that is able to conceive of the mind, and of the text, as thoroughly syntactical, paratactical, hypotactical. In other words, a tactic of remembering and reading that eschews the semantic in preference to a literary reference: a network of words and letters that in this paper will be constructed, in poems such as “The Idiot Boy,” “The Female Vagrant,” “Anecdote for Fathers,” and “Tintern Abbey,” through galleries such as “mine,” “mined,” and “mind”; “or,” “ore,” and “oar”; “now” and “own”; “woe” and “owe,” “vain,” “vane,” and “vein.” Yet this reading-as-memory of (reading) a text shall also give special attention to the writing of the present as complex imbrication of movements to the past and to the to-come (*avenir*), privileging for this purpose “Lines written near Richmond, upon the Thames, at Evening.”<sup>3</sup>

### *Flowereason*

*Floraison*, in French, means “flowing,” “flowering.” Yet it contains the letters of the word “reason” (*raison*). To talk about it imposes a mode that mimes it.

In *La différence en partage*, the brilliant analysis of rustling noises (DP 202-09), in particular in “The Idiot Boy,” with the stunning reading of “burr, burr”<sup>4</sup> (“Barbare [b°r; b°r en grec], parce que s'exprimant par borborygmes ['burr, burr]” [DP 206]) -- to which we’d only like to wedge in the question to which we’ll return later: when they link this barbaric sound to the “hoot” (l. 114) and to the “curr” (l. 114) of owlet, why the “hoot” is not heard as *who* and *cure*, so important in the poem, the “hoot” returning in Johnny’s last words “to-who, to-who” (l. 460) and the “curr” being the “as if my magic cure” (l. 436) by which Johnny’s poetic voice heals the dying Susan Gale, the metalepses (“to-who” and “hoot” attesting two agencies, a doubled who [two who-o]) and the echoing (“curr,” “cure”) being the “intertexture” (“Preface,” p. 305) or poetic language which Wordsworth is inventing in the *Lyrical Ballads* so as to create a poetic agency among citizens -- this reading of the noise of “burr” flows out, flourishes, in a crescendo-like concatenation in which we readers hear the “burr” relative to the infant’s oral stage, an *orality* intimately related to the *oracle*, but also to the aphorism, to a *form of horizon*, the horizon, almost an *oraison* or prayer (Porée does not mention *oraison*, but once he mentions “horizon,” he’s mimed and mined it<sup>5</sup>), an *oraison* in all the irreducible intransitivity of a prayer, prayer being, like poetry, its own object, the horizon of form itself, the horizon of *oraison*. This horizontal form of the oral oracular *oraison*, an *or-raison* (an original reason, the vein or source of “or” as poetic language, or language as irreducibly poetic; the “or” is the “ur”, the *Ur* of “burr” that is called, “tongue of pleasure before the Fall and sin, activated right on the lips of the *infans* stuck in the oral stage” [DP 208]) gives what Porée, frequently insisting on the profound “mimeticism” here (and Mallarmé’s *or* and “mime” are very close<sup>6</sup>), calls a “*savoir de la différence dans la ressemblance*” “*rejoignant en profondeur le ‘savoir différent’ mis en oeuvre dans les Lyrical Ballads*” [“a knowledge of difference in resemblance” “deeply rejoining the ‘the different lore’ [here, *savoir différent*, but at DP 198, “*connaissance différente*”] put into operation in *Lyrical Ballads*” (DP 209). In a wonderful moment of *floraison*, of *flowereason* and *éclosion*, Porée calls this “different lore” “*éclatante sagesse*”: brilliant, shining, bursting wisdom. Difference in sharing, *différence en partage*, called by Porée the “perception of the similar [*semblable*] in objects that are distant,” this sheer difference between, say, “ore” and “oar,” or between “or” and “ore,” is elsewhere in this book *La différence en partage* called “differance” (with an “a”) (DP 239). Like Betty Foy, Poree has “o’er and o’er told” told us “what to follow,” and it

“o’er and o’er” is, like the final rime in “The Idiot Boy,” the “glory” of his (Porée’s) “story.” To mime and to mine the narrator in the poem here, I (T.D.?)<sup>7</sup> declare that “Whether” he (Porée) does (tell, write) “in cunning or in joy,/ I cannot tell” (ll. 388-9), for this “or” is “suspended,” yet how now can we, now like Betty, not cry out, “Tell us,” “mind you tell us true” (ll. 450-51)? But how to hear now this “mind,” whose mine is this rich mine of flowereason, of pouring poetic reason, this *oraison*, how to hear the injunction “mind” when the very word that follows in the poem is the narrator’s “Now,” “Now Johnny all night long had heard” (l. 452), for “Now” activates, retro-activates all the instances in the poem, let alone in all the poems of *Lyrical Ballads*, of the word “now,” this “now” that, in its working, in the working of its travels, unravels any ownership, this “now” that mines and undermines, releases from the mine the letters n, o, and w, with which the problem of what it is to “own” is so radically raised in *Lyrical Ballads*? We would read here the function of the word “now” in all of the *Lyrical Ballads*, as perhaps the key perlocutionary and percussive poetic word, a word that will not be won, because it is not one, “now” that is never simply “now” but always potentially destabilizing the ideology of “own,” of “owning” that is everywhere in the *Lyrical Ballads*, but perhaps nowhere so insistently as in the poem “The Female Vagrant.”<sup>8</sup> Mining mental prospects in *Lyrical Ballads* and in *La différence en partage* renders vain any making mine when it comes to poetic property. Wordsworth's poetic thinking undoes what is one's "own" by submitting it to the "now" of poetry.

Porée’s beautiful reading of “Lines written near Richmond, upon the Thames, at Evening,” (*DP* 199-202) concludes in the suspended still: “Preluding this meditation, this pensivity, an homage in the form of suspense, mixed with immobility and tranquillity (the two meanings of *still*) on the edge of silence: ‘How calm! how still! the only sound,/ The dripping of the oar suspended’.” Porée leaves the “oar” suspended, not mentioning the “or.” The entire reading points to it, yet he hangs his cleats on an imaginary peg. Can we read in another’s shoes, will they fit?

In “Lines written near Richmond, upon the Thames, at Evening,” reading ends in suspension: the alternative of the “or” between death and life, between the ghost and presence, between memory and doing, between the past and the to-come.

This poem is about the illusion of presence in their between, the there in between. Yet the poem is constantly haunted by the trace, by the ghost. The poem is about the idea that there could be secured a pure presence, a continuous presence,

now. However, the whole poem is shadowed by a kind of absent presence, a devilish mockery. The suspension of thought hangs upon an undecidable “or.” This “or” in the “oar” refracts through the entire *Lyrical Ballads*, turning every occurrence of the sound /or/ into a mirror that is their mimesis.

The poem is an allegory for the movement of the line of poetry and of the progression of the being-perception of the poet. The boat flowing on the river is the poet and the pen tracing their way across the page. (The passing of the river represents a past that is never past.) The drama of the poem depends also upon the “now” of the poem where we (readers or the protagonist) are between the “evening darkness” and the “virtue’s holiest powers” (ll. 39-40, p. 147).

A tension, a contradiction, is inscribed at the outset by the line, “The boat her silent path pursues” (l. 4), where the verb of action is deferred, its place inverted with the predicate in which the idea of movement is annulled by its soundlessness. One has to imagine a rowboat, with the poet therefore facing the back of the boat, rowing with his back to the front of the boat cutting through the water. The opening forward creates the flow of a wake that fixes the poet-rower's gaze upon it. The tension is created by the immediate backlash, the reaction to this action, in the appearance of the wake: “And see how dark the backward stream!” (l. 5). The consequence of the forward movement is the backward stream, the trace made by the pursued path. The modality of the future opening is the uniquely backward glance. By being “dark” the backward has something ominous about it, as a word like “following gloom” (l. 10) will indicate, reinforced by its rime, “tomb” (l. 11). This backward movement is the creation of the past, “A little moment past” (l. 6).

Indeed, this movement forward is haunted, or seconded, or shadowed, by a mysterious other presence, the “Some other loiterer “ (l. 8). The creation of the past that is the receding result of the movement forward – the creation of what is behind us by our broaching, opening, the future – is alluring, enticing, seducing. Its smile (“so smiling!” l. 6) is deceitful, partaking of sorcery. It beguiles (“beguiling” l. 8): like the serpent in *Genesis* “beguiled me and I did eat.” Adam and Eve are lured thus by the devil. The absence of faith (“faithless gleam” l. 7) reinforces the connotation of danger in this godlessness. The word “beguile,” used in *Genesis* for the deceit into evil, is formed on the word “guile,” the meaning of which is divination, sorcery: using black magic, evil means, to mimic divine power. Defying any single reading, “And still, perhaps, with faithless gleam,/ Some other loiterer beguiling” (ll. 7-8), the word

“still” might be a verb, so that the smiling past, the backward movement of my moving in time (towards a to-come), *calm* or *appease* the mysterious “other loiterer”; or, “still” might be an adjective, characterizing the quietness of the lurking other, who is trying to draw back, to hold back, the stillness of those in the boat going forward; or “still” might mean there is yet something more, the “other loiterer” there with his “faithless” attraction or shine, his “gleam,” his ever-continuing seducing and beguiling. All these readings of “still” concur, however, in placing behind the forward-moving boat an attraction that would make the person in the boat look back to the “backward stream,” obsessed with the past: the idea is of a kind of melancholy or inability to move towards the to-come (save, perhaps, in the mode of retreat).

The “views” (l. 9) of the past “allure” the young poet into a kind of stasis: taking the twilight colours as if they were permanent: “heedless of the following gloom,/ He deems their colours shall endure” (ll. 10-11). The alliteration in “following gloom” and “faithless gleam” force an association of these two combinations. “Gloom,” word often paired with *doom*, is not sufficiently “*deem*[ed]” by the young poet. The “youthful bard” likes his condition of being deceived (“fond deceit” l. 13). This deceit consists in thinking that the passing moment is static, stable, enduring. It consists in holding on to the immediate past as a form of permanent present, and therefore turning one’s back on the necessity to move forward, even if what “may come to-morrow” be “grief and pain” (l. 16).

Nonetheless, the poem and its speaker advocate something else. The poem imagines a perpetual gliding, as if the present could become eternal: as if the course of the river were the course of a “history” that would not at all be historical, but rather a perpetual flow of sameness. This illusion of a permanent present is closely related, however, to a ghostliness. The verb “glide” used four times in the poem (twice in l. 17, l. 21, l. 33) has a strong association with the conventional description of the motion of a ghost. The word “glide” also, by alliteration, is linked to “faithless gleam” and “following gloom.” In line 17, “glide” is used in proximity with “*other bards*” (l. 18), just as “gleam” was used with the shadowy “*other loiterer*” (8) and as “gloom” was used for “youthful *bard*” (9). The “glide” movement therefore has something ghostly about it, reinforced moreover by the fact that the poet William Collins mourns the dead poet James Thomson, as indicated by the note to the poem. Collins is of course dead when Wordsworth writes (no one escapes this process of substitution, writing: by writing, I become as Collins to Wordsworth, as Wordsworth to me, as me

to you). The third stanza records an apostrophe to the river in the form of an imperative, a wish, a jussive mode practically. May the river glide forever so that visions always visit poets. The wish is for a transformation of the present into the future, but a future that would be an eternal repetition of the present, without (apparently) it seeming to be a repetition.<sup>9</sup> The word “glide” is itself the place for a sliding or gliding between supposedly different entities. The river is requested to “glide” (l. 17, l. 21) so that “our minds” “flow” “for ever” (l. 23) just as the river would “for ever glide” (l. 17), but this equation operating on the words “for ever” transfers the verb “flow,” used for the humans but which had substituted for “glide” used for the river, back to the river (“thy deep waters now are *flowing*” l. 24). The conceit here is that *both* the flow of the river *and* the flow of “our minds” reduce to the same movement, sheer difference collapsing into sheer sameness. A transformation.

Strangely enough, no criticism to our knowledge has pointed out the sexual explicitness of this lubricious “gliding,” the boat and the oar in the river as a description of vaginal penetration, recorded by the poet witnessing or poeticizing this very action of which he is also the participant. The “rich” “wave” (l. 1) as the opening and closing of the vagina (a wave both opens and engulfs), the poet-rower “facing thus the crimson” (l. 3), or the redness of the opened wake, while his “boat her silent path pursues,” making the boat entering the crimson collapse the distinction of penetrator and penetrated. The visual fixation, “*see* how dark the backward stream!/ A little moment past, so smiling!” (ll. 5-6), is caught in the rhythmic back and forth movement, and the *jouissance* is marked by the repetition of the climactic exclamation mark (“!”) the intensity of which is augmented by the synesthetic vision of what has just been *felt* while also redoubled by being *seen*, the present smile at the past motion: “A little moment past, so smiling!” This doubled vision -- of participant, yet also of spectator -- explains the witness, the third, “some other loiterer” (l. 8), as the person in the action is ghosted by his own perception of the action. The “youthful bard” is “allure[ed]” by “Such views”; he “nurses his fond deceit” that the “colours” of “Such views” never fade, “shall endure” (ll. 9-13). In the moment, one is seduced into thinking that it is so good that it should never stop. But the purpose of the blank space in this second stanza of eight lines, a white space that separates the final three lines from these first five, is to figure the fact that such a moment cannot exist indefinitely, as it is told by the last two lines, “Who would not cherish dreams so sweet,/ Though



grief and pain may come to-morrow?" (ll. 15-16). The poem is a celebration of the seeming endlessness of the moment of this sexual pleasure of penetration/being penetrated. It imaginatively exhorts the canal or river to remain forever wet, to "Glide gently, thus for ever glide" (l. 17), so that this rower-poet's vision of its lovely sides, its labia, its wave-lapped banks will come to other poets in the same seemingly gorged satiated orgasmic presence that this poet urges the river on to: "Glide gently, thus for ever glide,/ O Thames! that other bards may see,/ As lovely visions by thy side,/ As now, fair river! come to me" (ll. 17-20). The poet's desire is that the ever-flowing overflowing profound coming of the river become that coming of all who are in the sensation of its stream, where it is difficult not to see the wish for shared orgasm, shared sheer difference: "Oh glide, fair stream! for ever so" "'Till all our mind for ever flow/ As they deep waters now are flowing" (l. 21, ll. 23-24). If the poet knows, as the entire fourth stanza explains, that such a shared sheer difference is but a "Vain thought!" (l. 25), and that his predecessor Collins became frozen (frigid and non-flowing) from his inability to overcome the grief occasioned by death, by the end of such "pouring" (l. 30), it ends in the poised image of suspended sexual experience, the dripping oar as penis whose ejaculation is initiated, but suspended in a moment of determination to continue, to re-enter the stream, where others have stopped: "as we glide along,/ For him [Collins] suspend the dashing oar" (ll. 33-34), "The dripping of the oar suspended!" (l. 38) -- where the exclamation mark now signifies the realization of the *scandal* of this interruption -- "And pray that never child of Song/ May know his freezing sorrows more" (ll. 35-36). In these ways, the poem's reflection upon a permanent presence is inflected by a thinking of sexual difference, the difference of female and male sexuality, figured by the "river" (whore?) and the "poet"('s-oar), by the coming (together) of a certain feminine writing/sexuality and that of a certain male writing/ sexuality. Such transformation is the sharing of sheer difference, wherein river/woman and boat/poet-man are shorn by their mingled *touching that shore*, a touching that separates them at the same time as it joins the different shores.

This transformation, by which the river becomes (in all the weird literariness of this verb) the poet, has partly occurred by and with the last occurrence of "glide": "as we glide along" (l. 33).<sup>10</sup> The human action of rowing (implicit in the poem, for how else would a wake, a "backward stream" be created?) is however never explicitly named, though it is perhaps suggested that more to row – to make more effort ("to-

mor[e] row”, l. 16), that is, to make effort, to cause “grief and pain” (l. 16) – is even stopped, “For him suspend the dashing oar” (l. 34), reinforced by the metaleptic “dripping of the oar suspended!” (l. 38). Already, the “dashing oar” (l. 34) echoes the “dash of oars” in “Rime of the Ancyent Marinere” (l. 527), made by the band of seraphs. Note that “seraph” denotes a spirit, an angel, but “seraph” is also a gold coin. The words “as *we* glide along” suggest an entire conflation of the *poet* in his *boat* and the *river*, but *also* of the river with former poets. What this transformation entails is that pure presence is thought -- conceived, grasped, understood -- as thoroughly worked over by ghostliness, by a form of absence in presence or disembodied representation, by a notion of trace.<sup>11</sup> This doubleness, wherein pure presence is apprehended in the wake of spectrality, is manifested by the “for ever” “glide” of the river that is, all the while a seeming eternal present, strongly connoted as ghostly movement (from the associations of “glide,” “gleam,” “gloom,” “beguile”).

The fourth stanza acknowledges that the subjunctive wish (“Glide [...] that [...] may see” ll. 17-18) for continual presence of river and mind in the third stanza is, if fully poetic, rationally empty: “Vain thought!” Yet be that as it may, the subjunctive is repeated: “yet be as now thou art,/ That in thy waters may be seen” (ll. 25-26). If this poem, late in the *Lyrical Ballads* structured as they are as a movement toward *thoughtfulness*, calls “thought” “vain,” this negative characterization of “thought” attenuates the positive connotation that “thought” progressively gains through the *Lyrical Ballads*, moving as they are, flowing, towards the thoughtful poem, “Tintern Abbey.” However, though the wish for a fusion of river and mind is called empty thought, the subjunctive that follows it contains an important double image of the relation of nature and art, chiasmatically inverting itself, and thus imaging a gliding back and forth of two different things that cease, by the oscillation, to be distinguishable. The lines,

[...] yet be as now thou art,  
That in thy waters may be seen  
The image of a poet’s heart (ll. 25-27)

confound the distinction between “art” and “heart,” between nature and culture. “Art” is a verb used for the river, and “heart” is the capacity to feel of the poet, but the first line could be read as an apostrophe, an address: “be as thou, art.” “Now,” the river has been fully converted into art, having been the subject of this poem “Lines, written near Richmond, upon the Thames, at Evening” ever since that very title: such lines

flow in verse between its *blanks* like the river water flows between its *banks*; the line of verse is held in place by the blanks of the Wordsworth poem just as the river is contained by the "banks of the Wye" river in the thoughtful poem, "Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey, on revisiting the *banks of the Wye* during a tour." Indeed, "thy waters" then means *the waters of art*, artistic representation of water. In the artistic representation of water, seen is not water but the writer's heart, or, more accurately, the writer's art of water. "Art" glides from denoting the river to naming artistry, and "heart" glides from the poet's talent to a muscle. Both become images of the other. The poet requests that art be as "now," that art be as the "now," as that which is present, alive, yet art cannot be that. Art is really inhabited by ghosts, by the trace, by an *avenir* itself inhabited by its own being-historical. Not only is art spectral, but any *now* (present, presence<sup>12</sup>) is also thusly inhabited.

Repeating like the word "glide," the word "now" is used three times (l. 20, l. 24, l. 25), but, owing to the high number of words with the letters "ow," its echo or ghostly shadow is elsewhere in the poem ("row" l. 16; "bestowing" l. 22; "flow" l. 23; "flowing" l. 24; "how" five times, ll. 28, 37; "know" l. 36). The poem ends on a suspended now: the moment when the oar is suspended, and the prayer is made ("pray that [...] may know" ll. 35-36). The suspension of the "oar" is tantamount to how the "or" suspends the poem itself. Ending with the image of "evening darkness gathers round" that is itself waited upon by "virtue's holiest powers," the poem ends with two abstract forces, the former connoted to the devil, to the "other loiterer beguiling," the latter to that power to whom the prayer is, presumably, addressed. Holy and unholy wait, while the "oar" is suspended. By representing the alternative between pursuing a path forward and nostalgically gazing backwards, the poem leaves its reader with what appears as an either-or: darkness or virtue (unholy devil or holy god, art or heart)?

Through the galleries and veins of what is called, in the poem "The Female Vagrant" from *Lyrical Ballads*, "the mine's dire earthquake" ("Female Vagrant," l. 150, p. 94), the "oar suspended" and the "dashing oar" channel or tunnel the shock waves of an earthquake throughout *Lyrical Ballads*, an earthquake of literature, an earthquake that is the literary and the poetic in so-called communicative language. This "ore" of the "or" is capable of, as it is put in "The Female Vagrant," of "*shearing time*" (ll. 23, emphasis mine), ripping through, nay verily apart, any linear construction of *Lyrical Ballads*. It rips through the word, through words like

“forlorn,” “orphan,” “roar,” “store,” “story,” “glory,” “shore,” “lord,” and so on, endlessly in abyssal verification and versification.<sup>13</sup>

For, in “The Female Vagrant,” a “twinkling oar” (l. 9, p. 88) is the “more than mines of gold” (l. 4), more than any “proffered gold” (l. 90). This “oar,” associated with the “flood” (l. 3), is infinitely richer than the earth’s finite ore. The ore of the gold comes from underground, has to be pulled out of the earth (presumably from a mine owned and operated by the wealthy master who turns up with his “proffered gold”): not the case for the wealth of the woman’s father. The father’s “boat and twinkling oar” is a different kind of “ore” than the *gold* (or *or* in French). This difference between the “oar” and the ore of the gold tells of an alternative in the poem (one kind of wealth against another) that we found in the alternative between “gathering darkness” and “virtue’s holiest powers” (at the end of “Lines [...] upon the Thames) and its suspended “oar.”

This literary “ore” is perhaps, *mine de rien*, a *mime de rien*. Representing nothing but the scrambling, the dissemination, of representation, it is the mine of mimesis. We seem to have a “vain belief” in this vein that is so rich and extensive in Wordsworth. This “vain belief” -- like the “vain belief” in “Tintern Abbey” (l. 51) that turns the “banks of the [river] Wye” into the seemingly infinite source of the richness of imagination, richer than any monetary Bank of England or World Bank -- this “vain belief” gives us to think the “banks of the Wye” in a radically different way than the ontological motivation of asking “Why?”, of seeking a traditionally classic notion of truth. Our “vain belief” in the “banks of the Wye” accredits truth *in literature: truth-in/as-literature*, in the bed under the *river*, beneath the *verity*, under the *riverity* of erasure. This “vain belief” in the *literary banks of Why* operates according to an other economy, an economy that makes the name of the *house* into an uncanny, an *unheimlich* place, to wit, the earth, “earth” sharing the same origin as “ore.”<sup>14</sup> This uncanny earth or ore is how literature gives us to experience the world (*Welt, monde*) in its relation to the earth (*Erde, terre*). It follows other laws, such as that given in the poem “Anecdote for Fathers,” when the boy *makes* truth by eyeing the “vane” on the top of the house. This “vain belief” is therefore a belief in the emptiness of belief, the vanity or *veinity* of thought, in other words, it is a belief in mimesis evacuated of any ontological pretensions.

In “Anecdote for Fathers,” in response to his father’s question of “Why? Why?” (“Why? Edward, tell me why?”, l. 48), our five year old, non-adult, and thus

non-normal consciousness, makes a “reply” that he snatches from the “house-top” (ll. 49-52, p. 110): “Why, Edward, tell me why?”/ —there was in sight/ It caught his eye, he saw it plain – / Upon the house-top, glittering bright,/ A broad and gilded vane” (l. 52). This “eye” is a passive “I,” caught by a sight, a “vane” (“vein” and “vain thought”), its gilding gliding into his poetic vision. The question is at least, but the question divvies itself with infinite speed: how stop the post, how spot the stop, how post the tops: “house-stop”? How stop radical dissemination, scrambling, scattering? Try poetry. Try, poet, try.

There is an emptiness here in the boy: it is the emptiness of truth, of truth understood classically as pre-existent, extra-textual, and stable. It is the truth of the “answer” as if the “answer” existed somewhere outside representation. This emptiness of the boy, his pure passivity, and thus receptivity to this sight of the “gilded vane,” is what Wordsworth glimpses in the Preface, when defining his language:

The language too of these men is adopted [...] because such men [and children] hourly communicate with the best objects from which the best part of language is originally derived; and because, from their rank in society and the sameness and narrow circle of their intercourse, being less under the action of social *vanity* [my emphasis] they convey their feelings and notions in simple and unelaborated expressions. Accordingly such a language arising out of repeated experience and regular feelings is a more permanent and a far more philosophical language than that which is frequently substituted for it by Poets. (p. 290)

The “vane” is the pure poetic passivity by which the socially “vain” is undone. The passivity of the boy is not the “action” of “social vanity”; the child’s language is a “more permanent and far more philosophical language” precisely by being utterly aleatory: its permanence and its philosophy consist in its unpredictability, its lack of predication prior to its actual, passive, diction. This passive diction is what Wordsworth substitutes for the “poetic diction” (Preface) that he sees being used as false substitute by over-active Poets. It is the “wise passiveness” (l. 20) that the passive poet William in the poem “Expostulation and Reply” posits as that which makes it possible that “things for ever speak,” as long as one de-activate thought which seeking ontological truth. This “wise passiveness” is Why’s/ Wye’s passiveness.<sup>15</sup>

The “vane” defies, belies, the “vain thought” from “Lines written near Richmond...” (l. 25) that here applies to the father who thinks that the truth, the answer, and responsibility, are the possession of a conscious, normal, adult’s activity.

That is to say, the “vane” short-circuits the “vain thought,” that thought of normative adults that presupposes a pre-existent foundation, itself the basis of the classical philosophical (Cartesian, Kantian) subject.<sup>16</sup> This “vane” counters the bleeding caused by a society that requires ever more payment, ever more ownership, ever more control, despite and even because of the inability of some to maintain such an economy. In the poem “The Last Flock,” “it was a vein that never stopp’d,/ Like blood-drops from my heart they dropp’d” (ll. 63-64, p. 125). That “vein” is opened, bleeding to death the owner of the sheep, as each sheep is extracted from him, from his “heart.” “The Last Flock” recounts how an ownership society makes the shepherd “owe” so much that he can *own* nothing, not even his “own children” that he envisions slaughtering to sell as food (l. 82) in this *now* (“now,” l. 39). This-now, his present that disappears as fast as melting “snow” (l. 59, l. 90), is reduced to a repeating “woeful day” (l. 70), as his flock, “they dwindled, dwindled, *one by one*” “they dwindled *one by one*” (l. 60, l. 66), so that the marketplace *won* as he loses and dwindles. The many suffering people in *Lyrical Ballads* cry out “O woe is me” (“The Thorn,” “The Mad Mother,” “The Female Vagrant,” etc.); the poet tries to respond with song that approaches the “owlet” (in “The Idiot Boy,” l. 3) whose “curr” (l. 114) is, through the effort of poetry, through a revolution or inversion making the “owlet” into the palindrome of a poetic “tel(l) wo(e),” the poetic “magic cure” (l. 436) that, for the Wordsworth of 1798-1802, might have the might to transform, in a deferred “now” (deferred, to come), society based on the idea that even language itself can be owned (controlled, managed, marketed), won and one.<sup>17</sup>

The “vane” of the five year old is therefore a different “lore,” a different learning and a different reading. The father’s trying to force the child risks teaching the child to lie. The subtitle of “Anecdote for Fathers” is “shewing how the art of lying may be taught.” Yet, given the positive connotation of “art” throughout the *Lyrical Ballads*, is it not possible to take the “art of lying” as *saying* something about “art,” and not *thinking* “lying” under the two conventional dogmas, namely “truth” as positive value and “honesty” as moral value? If it is possible that *je me trompe*, that I make mistakes but also that I lie to myself, *irreducibly, ineluctably*, that I make mistakes accidentally but lie to myself on purpose, yet, vice versa, that I make mistakes on purpose and lie to myself unconsciously, then a different thinking of lying would be necessary, one that does not presuppose a negative or unnecessary

value to lying, that assigns lying neither to Christianity-as-truth (morality) or *homoïosis*-as-truth (ontology).<sup>18</sup> The art of lying *may* thus be taught.

But it's time, *l'heure*, to stop this exploration of Wordsworth's /orz/. To conclude, we can say, of this operation of "or" in Wordsworth: but this is what Mallarmé did!<sup>19</sup> The statement needs to be turned around. What Mallarmé did, Wordsworth already had done. In this way, I submit that Wordsworth is the advent of a poetics that will flourish in Mallarmé, and that to read Wordsworth, one must be alert to this poetics. But I am poorly armed to make this argument, not having the competence in Mallarmé. One will say I am playing with words. Yet I would rather play with them than make war with them, or even use them. Marc Porée is alert to this play; in the deed of his writing he displays it. But he does much more than just this *jeu*, because he opens it to both its joy and its cunning, in their oscillating imbricating sheer difference. Such differential reading, flush with a differential writing, are *literary*. They attest a *poetic* thinking, a poetic *memory*, a memory of thought and thought of memory, to forget which denies literary history any chance of being historical.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bonnecase, Denis & Marc Porée. 2011. *Lyrical Ballads de Wordsworth et Coleridge. La différence en partage*, PUF and CNED. Paris.
- Bennett, Andrew. 2007. *Wordsworth Writing*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Derrida, Jacques. 1962. "Introduction," to Edmund Husserl, *l'Origine de la Géométrie*, trans. J. Derrida, PUF. Paris
- , 1972 (1970). "La double séance," in his *La dissémination*, Seuil. Paris.
- , 1974. "Mallarmé," *Tableau de la littérature française*, Gallimard. Paris.
- , 2001. "La langue n'appartient pas," *Europe* 79 (861-862) 81-91.
- , 2004 [1994-95, 2001, 2002]. "Histoire du mensonge. Prolégomènes." *Jacques Derrida. Cahiers de l'Herne*, eds. Marie-Louise Mallet, Ginette Michaud. Éditions de l'Herne. Paris.
- Dutoit, Thomas. 2002. "Upearching the Field of English Studies: Jacques Derrida's Discourse of *Pensées*," *European Journal of English Studies* (6.3) 125-142.
- Mallarmé, Stéphane. 1877 [1948]. *Les mots anglais*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, La Pléiade. Gallimard. Paris.
- Parrish, Stephen M. 1954. "Dramatic Technique in the *Lyrical Ballads*, PMLA, vol. 74, p. 85-97.
- Sheats, Paul D. 1973. *The Making of Wordsworth's Poetry, 1785-1798*, Harvard University Press. Cambridge.
- Wolfson, Susan J. 1997. *Formal Charges. The Shaping of Poetry in British Romanticism*, Stanford University Press. Palo Alto.
- , 1986. *The Questioning Presence. Wordsworth, Keats, and the Interrogative Mode in Romantic Poetry*, Cornell University Press. Ithaca.
- Wordsworth, William. 1995. *The Prelude. The Four Texts (1798, 1799, 1805, 1850)*. Ed. Jonathan Wordsworth. Penguin. London.
- Wordsworth, William & Samuel Taylor Coleridge. 1991. *Lyrical Ballads*. Ed. with intro., notes and appendices by R. L. Brett and A. R. Jones. New intro., Nicholas Roe. Routledge Classics. London and New York.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Denis Bonnecase and Marc Porée, *Lyrical Ballads de Wordsworth et Coleridge. La différence en partage* (Paris: PUF and CNED, 2011), subsequent quotations from it indicated by DP plus page number.
- <sup>2</sup> William Wordsworth, *The Prelude* (1805 version) Book 1, l. 402. For full reference, see bibliography.
- <sup>3</sup> This poem is strangely unmentioned upon by numerous specialists of Wordsworth. In his openly Derridean *Wordsworth Writing*, Andrew Bennett does not mention it, and neither do Susan J. Wolfson (in either her *The Questioning Presence. Wordsworth, Keats, and the Interrogative Mode in Romantic Poetry* or *Formal Charges. The Shaping of Poetry in British Romanticism*), Paul D. Sheats in "The Lyrical Ballads," nor Stephen M. Parrish in "Dramatic Technique in the *Lyrical Ballads*."
- <sup>4</sup> Quotations from *Lyrical Ballads* are referenced according to William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*, the 1798 edition used. See bibliography. All references to this collection will give line numbers of poems under study, and, when a new poem is introduced, page numbers. Here, l. 107, p. 134.
- <sup>5</sup> I refer only to Porée, because at the 2012 NASSR conference, he confirmed that these pages were penned by him and not by Bonnecase.
- <sup>6</sup> Our reading of Wordsworth, of the poetic possibilities of a reading that explores the mimesis involved in words miming words (such as *ore, or, oar*, etc.) is indebted to Jacques Derrida's path-breaking essay, "La double séance," devoted to Mallarmé's work *Mimique* and of which Derrida writes for example: "OR, qui se condense ou se monnaie sans compter dans l'enluminure d'une page. Le signifiant OR (O + R) y distribué, éclatant, en pièces rondes de toutes tailles," p. 320, n. 54. Or, "Or, est-ce un mot ou plusieurs mots? Le linguiste dira peut-être -- et le philosophe -- que chaque fois, le sens et la fonction étant autres, nous devons lire un mot différent. Et pourtant cette diversité se croise et repasse par un simulacre d'identité dont il faut bien rendre compte. Ce qui circule ainsi, pour n'être pas une famille de synonyme, est-ce le masque simple d'une homonymie?" J. Derrida, "Mallarmé," *Tableau de la littérature française*, p. 377.
- <sup>7</sup> As he has helped me, is "T.D." me or his I aiding me (*je [M.P.] t [T.D.] 'aidais*)? "I" cannot tell.



<sup>8</sup> The limits of this paper do not permit an exposition of how "The Female Vagrant" is structured by the interplay of "now" and "own"; suffice it here, therefore, to say that in tension are a thinking of the present (the "now") at odds with another thinking of the present (capitalist ownership and poverty or disownership, attested through the poem's obsession with that, under the word "own"). We will return to this general point, however, below.

<sup>9</sup> Whether it is wished for as repetition or not is not really clear: it is possible that the awareness of the previous, dead, poets is such that the present that is requested by Wordsworth as something he wishes to continue might be accepted as repetition, and that might be where the uncanny doubling "other" comes in.

<sup>10</sup> "[T] he *gliding* vessel" in "The Female Vagrant," l. 162, is the ghostly ghastly ship on the ocean.

<sup>11</sup> Marc Porée calls this Wordsworth's "préférence pour un lyrisme de la hantise" (*DP* 202), an original, Bartlebyian, *pre-ference*.

<sup>12</sup> A way to put this would be that the present is the past of the future. We refer to the zigzagging movement and moment that, for Husserl, is the present conceived as *both* retention (past) and protention (future). Wordsworth's poetry, the flow of its syntax, we submit, *narrates* this *experience*. For a reading of protention and retention as zigzag, see Thomas Dutoit, "Upearching the Field of English Studies: Jacques Derrida's Discourse of *Pensées*," *European Journal of English Studies* (6.3) 2002, 125-142.

<sup>13</sup> Marc Porée, commenting upon this paper, reminds me of different British pronunciations of the /or/ "phoneme" or "morpheme," and that they would include words like "awe." This potential dissemination, the potency of this kind of dispersal or flying apart of the text, might be the condition of possibility of memory, and the core of a mental prospect.

<sup>14</sup> In an obscure form (attested in the *Oxford English Dictionary*), "ore" can also be spelt "oar." The word "ore" can also denote "shore," as attested by the same *OED* (from the year 1652). "Ore" can also mean "beginning" or origin (*OED*), as well as name a "coin."

<sup>15</sup> "Nor less I deem that there are powers,/ Which of themselves our minds impress,/ That we can feed this mind of ours, In a wise passiveness./ Think you, mid all this might sum/ Of things for ever speaking,/ That nothing of itself will come,/ But we must still be seeking?" (ll. 21-28, p. 148). The "impress" here lets us hear the "imprest" (l. 1) of "Lines written near Richmond, upon the Thames, at Evening."

<sup>16</sup> The moral of Wordsworth writing poems about mad mothers, idiot boys, little girls who seem to deny death or little boys who lie, sexual deviants, convicts, the homeless or the excluded, feeble elderly people (in short, all of the poems he writes in *Lyrical Ballads*), inserted next to his inscription poems (the "Lines..." poems) about a poetic persona, is that poetry needs to think society not from the supposed normal rational adult, but rather as a whole encompassing the so-called abnormal, and deconstructing the opposition normal/ abnormal. Its aim is to "retrouve[r] la valeur poétique de la passivité" (J. Derrida, "Introduction," p. 104). Wordsworth's project is to counter social projects that imagine society based on the "normal" adult:

Dans l'horizon de cette conscience de co-humanité, c'est l'humanité 'normale et adulte' qui est 'privilegiée' à la fois 'comme horizon de l'humanité et comme communauté de langage'. Le thème de la normalité adulte qui occupait de plus en plus de place dans les analyses husserliennes, est ici traité comme allant de soi. [...] Dans *La crise de l'humanité européenne*, le phénomène de crise est présenté comme une 'maladie' de la société et de la culture européennes, maladie qui n'est pas 'naturelle' et ne relève pas de 'quelque art naturel de guérir'. Cette 'pathologie' a d'ailleurs le sens éthique profond d'une chute dans la 'passivité', d'une incapacité à se rendre 'responsable' du sens dans une activité ou une 'réactivation' authentiques. L'activité technique – celle de la science aussi – en tant que telle, est une passivité au regard du sens ; elle l'agitation du malade et, déjà, le tremblement d'un délire. [...] Pour accéder à l'*eidōs* de l'humanité et du langage, certains hommes et certains sujets parlants – les fous et les enfants – ne sont pas de *bons*. Et d'abord, sans doute, parce qu'ils n'ont pas en propre d'essence pure et rigoureusement déterminable. Mais s'il en est ainsi, la normalité en a-t-elle une, elle qui commence où finit l'enfance et cesse quant naît la folie? C'est qu'ici l'expression de la normalité adulte n'est pas une détermination éidétique donnée, mais l'index d'une normativité idéale qui est à l'horizon des adultes normaux de fait. J. Derrida, "Introduction," p. 74-75.

<sup>17</sup> In an interview entitled "La langue n'appartient pas," on the poet Paul Celan, Derrida held that poets-translators ("poètes-traducteurs") who experience what we have tried to envisage as Wordsworth's poetic relation to language are politically exemplary: "sont exemplaires politiquement. Ce sont eux qui ont à expliquer, à enseigner, qu'on peut cultiver et inventer l'idiome, parce qu'il ne s'agit pas de cultiver un idiome donné mais de produire l'idiome [...]. Ce sont à mon avis ces poètes-là qui

---

aujourd'hui ont à donner une leçon politique à ceux qui en ont besoin sur la question de la langue et de la nation," p. 87.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. J. Derrida, "Histoires du mensonge," *Cahiers de l'Herne. Jacques Derrida*, pp. 495-517, here p. 517.

<sup>19</sup> "Autre veine -- à suivre l'or colore l'heure de tous les couchers [...] de Mallarmé." J. Derrida, "La double séance," in *La dissémination* (Paris: Seuil, 1972 [1969-70, first publication]), p. 321. The "or" (say, between the diabolical and the good ghost) instances undecidability: given a system of axioms, undecidable is when a proposition is neither an analytical consequence from axioms, nor a contradiction with them, this undecidable is not because of some enigma, some mystery, some content. Rather, it is made by the formal and syntactical; syntax is the law of pivoting, of alternative, of undecidability, and Derrida isolates the unit "or" as a very rich "alliage," allied metal, of this. What is important is the syntactical positioning of a word, where placement in syntax is what determines the word, not its semantic content. The undecidability is not the hidden depth of some "content"; the undecidability is the result of location on a sort of horizontal plane (there's something Saussurean in this definition of undecidability, like his saying "meaning" of a word is not in the word but in its relations to other words that it is not). Intelligibility is not unique meaning; intelligibility is the syntactic relationality, textuality. Intelligibility of Wordsworth that does not take stock of veins such as "ruth/root" or "ore, or, oar" is *not at all* intelligible, is missing almost the entirety of its poetic dimension, that is, its textual, written and spoken, dimension. If this insistence upon syntax is claimed to be, or dismissed as being, ahistorical or formal, then it will be necessary to accept also the annihilation of the unconscious, and accept a notion of history that does without the unconscious, the so-called ahistoricism or non-temporality of the unconscious. A literary historicism that evacuates this complex unconscious history is itself ahistorical and unliterary. Cf. Mallarmé *Les mots anglais* (1052-53) on "or," as monosyllable (by itself), as agglutination (combined with other letters in a word, like "W-or-dsw-or-th") and as flexion (distributed in a word, like "o-a-r").