Wordsworth Studies and the Ethics of Criticism: 
The “Tintern Abbey” Debate Revisited

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Abstract

This paper raises important questions concerning the “ethics” of criticism with reference to Wordsworth scholarship. Reviewing the major critical approaches to Wordsworth’s canonical poem “Tintern Abbey,” I explore their implications for doing literary criticism today. I begin with an analysis of the polemics between the New Historicists and their opponents regarding the defense of and attack on Romantic bardolatry. Then I investigate how the debate has subtly involved such issues as the critic’s attitudes toward the author, other critics, and the “unprofessional” reader, the respect for probable authorial intention, and the controversial questions regarding literary value and interpretive freedom. While applauding the recent “greening” of Romantic studies for its healthy dilution of bardolatry and its emphasis on the contemporary global relevance of criticism, I conclude by pointing out the difficulty of transcending local conflicts, drawing on a recent case concerning the politics of space in the Wye valley.

Keywords

William Wordsworth, ethics of criticism, New Historicism, ecocriticism, “Tintern Abbey”

The New Historicist turn of Romantic studies in the 1980s has produced some fresh interpretations of William Wordsworth’s poetry. The Leftist obsession with local, particularly traumatic, historical and economic details which are supposedly suppressed in the literary text or denied by its author, however, has also met with strong objections from scholars of other critical and political allegiances.¹ The recent “greening” of Romanticism, with its attention to contemporary global environmental issues, poses an especially noticeable challenge to the New Historicist approach. This essay offers a critical review of the “Tintern Abbey” debate, by which is meant the contest between

¹ See, for example, Helen Vendler, Kavis Goodman, and Steven Cole respectively.
the major theoretical approaches to this canonical work by Wordsworth from the mid-1980s to 2000, with particular attention to the New Historicism and ecocriticism. To explore the continuing relevance of this debate to us today, I would like to reframe the polemics concerned in terms of what Tobin Siebers has called the “ethics of criticism.”\(^2\) Literary criticism, by nature, is “ethical” through and through, because whenever we make critical judgments on a text and its author, or weighing relative merits of rivaling interpretations, such notions as right or wrong, fairness, justice and responsibility are inevitably involved. After the New Historicism, as I will explain, much of Romantic bardolatry has been ruthlessly undermined, leading us to some sort of ethics of ambivalence and polyvalence, a critical embarrassment though not necessarily of a crippling kind. For ecocritics, “Romantic ecology” is a timely alternative for breaking the Cold War “spell of antagonistic oppositionalism” (Kroeber 3), allowing us to shed the “crude old model of Left and Right” haunting the New Historicism (Bate, \textit{Romantic Ecology} 3). Having assessed the contributions of both New Historicism and ecocriticism to the ethics of criticism, in the later part of this paper I will explore the difficulties of “greening” Romanticism with reference to a concrete case regarding the politics of space in the Wye valley.

I. The Contentious Business of Historicizing “Tintern Abbey”

Let me first sketch an important line of development with respect to the ethics of criticism beginning with the so-called “visionary” stage of Anglo-American Romantic studies. By “visionary” Romanticism I refer to the established Romantic scholarship consolidated roughly during the 1960s and early 1970s, primarily in North America, by such influential Romanticists as Northrop Frye, M. H. Abrams, the early Harold Bloom, and Geoffrey Hartman, marked by the valorization of individual visions, transcendental imagination, and often, but not always, organic unity.\(^3\) Underneath the “received

\(^2\) For more discussion about Siebers’s use of the term, see the beginning of section 2 in my present essay.

\(^3\) I wish to clarify my usage of “visionary Romanticism” here. The word “visionary” does not exactly mean the same thing to the Romantic writers themselves as to the critics in the second half of the twentieth century. Coleridge, for example, once praised Brissot, the French Girondin leader executed in 1793, as “rather a sublime visionary” than a shrewd, Machiavellian politician. See Coleridge 35. In critics like Frye, the early Bloom, and Hartman, the sense of impracticability remains, but there is a new emphasis on individualism and aestheticism: the Romantics are seen as “visionaries” not only because
wisdom” on British Romanticism, there thrives a weighty heritage of Romantic bardolatry: the male Romantic poet perceived as a prophet-seer, in possession of extraordinary sensitivity and personal insights, whose work will continue to enlighten the entire human kind, or at least, in Wordsworth’s own words, “extend the domain of sensibility for the delight, the honor, and the benefit of human nature” (751). There is, in addition, a constellation of related Romantic ideas such as poetic spontaneity, originality, the transcendental imagination, and the cult of feelings. The advent of post-structuralism in the 1970s, it would appear, must have severely undermined Romantic bardolatry. However, despite all the talk of undecidability and “death of the author,” a curious sense of originality and insight is still cherished by the critics most acutely conscious of linguistic instability and the decentering of the subject. The post-structuralists only need to replace transcendence with linguistic hypersensitivity and reflexivity, and the Romantic as a “clairvoyant” prophet-seer having much to teach the future generations is thus reconfirmed. What has troubled many Wordsworth scholars, so far as the ethics of criticism is concerned, is perhaps not so much the relatively short-lived deconstructive turn but the subsequent rise of the New Historicism in the early 1980s. If the key terms for “visionary” Romanticists are nature, imagination, dialectic and transcendence, those for the New Historicists are “Napoleonic” history, denial, betrayal and apostasy. The New Historicist vocabulary forcibly reminds us that this new approach to Romanticism, with its propensity to moral indictments, is an overtly ethical criticism. Whereas Wordsworth in “Tintern Abbey” is valued in “visionary” Romanticism for his turn to nature for self-restoration and for a nourishing human relationship, for the New Historicists he is guilty of renouncing his former revolutionary ideals, retreating to the comforts of nature or of solipsism. The standard picture of Romanticism, argues Jerome McGann, is “dominated by a Romantic Ideology, by an uncritical absorption in Romanticism’s self-representations” (1). But the accusation of Romantic “ideology” in the sense of false consciousness in the Romantic poets and in
the “visionary” critics as well amounts to an uneasy Oedipal struggle, involving critical violence and leading to an ineluctable ethical ambivalence.

If by “historicizing” is simply meant, in the broadest sense, the attention to stylistic, linguistic or thematic peculiarities of a literary text and the effort to explain them by moving beyond the text, extracting relevant cultural, historical and literary background information in order to situate them, then few of us would object to historicizing per se. The New Historicist imperative of “always historicizing” (Jameson 9), nevertheless, has its much narrower meaning, which is implicated in some curious value orientations, a topic I shall take up in the next section. Suffice it to say at the outset that different ways of historicizing might lead to utterly contradictory conclusions about the poem and its author.

Let me begin with a few concrete examples. With respect to the descriptive style, curiously, the poem tends toward abstraction at the expense of specific local details. To account for this stylistic peculiarity, an understanding of the eighteenth-century British tradition of the picturesque will be helpful. Both Nicholas Roe and Colin Pedley have accounted for the tendency toward abstraction in this poem by reminding us of the influence of William Gilpin’s theory of the picturesque, which requires the idealization of the landscape, trimming the deformities and subduing “the human details of landscape in a remote perspective” (Roe 119). But for John Barrell, this “abstract vision” entails a certain bourgeois ideology, a shying away from the harsh reality of social inequities and poverty. Following Barrell, Marjorie Levinson and other New Historicists accuse Wordsworth of the sin of “evading History,” in the sense that he deliberately overlooks the beggars, industry, and tourism in the abbey’s environs, if not also evading the French Revolution. Taking what others might see as a rather normal stylistic feature, Levinson declares that “Wordsworth’s pastoral prospect is a fragile affair, artfully assembled by acts of exclusion” (Great Period 32). She is in effect indicting Wordsworth for “apostasy,” betrayal of his earlier radical ideals and withdrawal into consoling selfhood. To rescue Wordsworth, Roe draws our attention to a less noticeable detail: even though the poem “overlooks and modifies human presence as picturesque theory required” (Great Period 126), the literary allusions to Paradise Lost and King Lear imply no idyllic retreat but the suffering of humanity, echoing the famous Wordsworthian phrase “hearing oftentimes / The still, sad music of humanity.”

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5 For a more detailed discussion of the descriptive style in “Tintern Abbey,” see the beginning of section 4 in my present essay.

6 See also Colin Pedley.
ity” (90-91).\(^7\) In addition, Roe suggests that the walking tour itself in the 1790s, because of the conservative political climate, might well be “construed [...] as a deliberate expression of democratic opinions” (128), hence Wordsworth’s poem is not as escapist as it might seem.

To further discuss the political implications of the different ways of historicizing some local details in “Tintern Abbey,” let us examine the following lines, which appear to be rather straightforward at first sight:

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\begin{align*}
\text{[...]} & \text{These pastoral farms,} \\
& \text{Green to the very door; and wreaths of smoke} \\
& \text{Sent up, in silence, from among the trees!} \\
& \text{With some uncertain notice, as might seem} \\
& \text{Of vagrant dwellers in the houseless woods,} \\
& \text{Or of some Hermit’s cave, where by his fire} \\
& \text{The Hermit sits alone. (16-22)}
\end{align*}
\]

For Roe, the smoke is no more than a pleasing little detail in Wordsworth’s picturesque vision of the landscape. Roe tells us that William Gilpin’s friend Samuel Rogers had written in his journal some scenic details observed during his Wye journey, which appear in “Tintern Abbey” as well. Notable among them are the blue wreaths. In Dorothy’s Alfoxden Journal, too, we find a similar description: “a few wreaths of blue smoke, spreading along the ground” (qtd. in Roe 120). Roe’s move is to persuade us that Wordsworth’s description is motivated by the picturesque convention rather than aiming at crude realism: he might be responding to “Dorothy’s prose rather than his own immediate observation” (120). In a radically different way, Levinson attends also to the smoke, and to the vagrants and the pastoral farms in the poem. Trying to recover what is supposedly evaded by the poem, she offers us the following historical “thick description,” rich in gloomy details:

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\text{In 1798, the Wye Valley, though still affording prospects of great natural beauty, presented less delightful scenes as well. The region showed prominent signs of industrial and commercial activity: coal mines, transport barges noisily plying the river, miners’ hovels. The town of Tintern, a}
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\(^7\) See also Roe 126-27.
half mile from the Abbey, was an iron-working village of some note, and in 1798 with the war at full tilt, the works were unusually active. The forests around Tintern—town and Abbey—were peopled with vagrants, the casualties of England’s tottering economy and of wartime displacement. Many of these people lived by charcoal burning, obviously a marginal livelihood. The charcoal was used in the furnaces along the river banks. The Abbey grounds were crowded with the dispossessed and unemployed, who begged coins of the tourists anxious to exercise their aesthetic sensibilities. The cottage plots noted in the poem are “green to the very door” because the common lands had been enclosed some time back and the only arable land remaining to the cottager was his front garden. ([Great Period 29-30])

I have quoted Levinson at length to demonstrate the heaviness of such New Historicist historicizing exercises. Some readers facing such a “textual explication” may indeed be overwhelmed, perhaps not so much by its sheer weight but because it is hard for them to perceive the connection between the sordid reality “uncovered” and the apparently beautiful verses. At any rate, the depressing view that the “vagrant dwellers” are desperate paupers, that the smoke comes from the filthy labor of charcoal burning, and that the green pastoral farms house poor farmers victimized by the enclosure, does not help elucidate the literary value of the poem. We shall return to this knotty question later. Let us now proceed to the even more controversial figure in the lines quoted above: the hermit.

Remarking on the picturesque tradition, John Hunt points out that “no landscape garden of the eighteenth century was complete without its hermitage or even its hermit” (1). The hermit is a conventional symbol of rural retreat and solitary meditation. For the New Historicists, this figure aptly indicates Wordsworth’s withdrawal to solipsism and goes well with the famous indictment that he “lost the world merely to gain his own immortal soul” (McGann 88). However, Damian Davies has discovered one probable allusion which could save Wordsworth from such charges. In the sixth to early seventh century, Davies tells us, there lived a king of Gwent and saint known as “Tewdrig the Blessed,” who had abandoned his rulership and retired to Tintern. Faced with a Saxon invasion, nonetheless, he was called out of his hermitage and died as a patriotic war hero. Noting that Wordsworth might have read about Tewdrig before he wrote “Tintern Abbey,” Davies contends that the hermit allusion, instead of implying
solitary retreat, actually “embodies political duty and ‘the still, sad music of humanity’” mentioned in “Tintern Abbey” (424). So the excavation of a seemingly trivial historical detail might, if surprisingly, turn an interpretation of the poem upside down.

The angry responses aroused by New Historicism and related feminist and Marxist readings in the “Tintern Abbey” debate, in retrospect, have a great deal to do with the apparent Leftist attack on Romantic bardolatry with its attendant assumptions about the poet as prophet-seer, the lasting universal relevance of the poem, and the role of the critic as the defender rather than apostate of seemingly endangered Romantic values such as the cult of feelings, the obsession with personal growth, and the belief in transcendence, values which appear to be hopelessly dated in an age of poststructuralism, postmodernism and postcolonialism. The word “assaults” in the title of Helen Vendler’s “Tintern Abbey: Two Assaults” is quite telling. For Vendler, Levinson’s accusation of Wordsworth’s evasion of history is absolutely unjust, sadly betraying that a New Historicism like her “has never found anything to like in the poem” (178), a pathetic blindness to the obvious lyrical dimension of the poem. The second major “assault” on the poem and its author, as Vendler sees it, comes from Barrell’s feminist-deconstructionist reading. Having recourse to John Locke and David Hartley, Barrell distinguishes between two kinds of language: the literal “language of the sense” (153) and the figural, or “meditative and contemplative language” (156-57). Reading “Tintern Abbey,” Barrell claims that there is an opposition between Dorothy’s and Wordsworth’s former experience of nature as “wild ecstasies” and Wordsworth’s present mature meditation on nature, corresponding to the distinction between the primitive and the philosophic languages mentioned above. For Barrell, although the philosophic language seems to be the higher form of the two in the hierarchy, actually there is a curious dependence. In Wordsworth’s case, “the language of the sense, as presently employed by Dorothy, stands as a present and audible guarantee of the meanings in his own language of the intellect; it assures him of the secure foundation of his language in the language of the sense” (164). Analogically, “he needs to believe that Dorothy will grow up and sober up, for by doing so she will naturalize and legitimate his own loss of immediate pleasure in nature” (164). But, Barrell argues, “Dorothy can perform these two functions, only if her potential for intellectual growth is acknowledged, but only if, also, that potential is never actualized” (164). Paradoxically, she “must be acknowledged as capable of growing up” but she is not allowed to grow up: “she must [...] remain a child, if she is to remain a nurse; and she must
remain Wordsworth’s nurse if Wordsworth himself is to remain a man” (165). Barrell’s sophisticated, if not sophistic, reading of Wordsworth’s alleged exploitation of Dorothy, for Vendler, demonstrates his “animus against the poem” (182), and is not only a methodological blunder of mistaking the lyric for political allegory but, above all, an inexcusably “vulgar” attack on the poem.

David Bromwich’s somewhat similar reading of “Tintern Abbey” is even more naked in his portrait of Wordsworth as an exploiter of his own sister. Nature in this poem, Bromwich alleges, “is a seclusion that belongs to the poet alone” (2). The reader is only “an eavesdropper, or at most a passerby in the mind of Wordsworth” (2). And Dorothy, “to whom he bequeaths the beauty he has gained, is treated with a reserve that is sometimes officious, sometimes severe” (2). Bromwich believes that “Wordsworth was jealous of the strength Dorothy could enjoy without his wisdom” and “took his revenge by proving how much she would need his wisdom—‘matured / Into a sober pleasure’—when at last her childlike powers gave out like his” (22; emphasis added). Tortured by his own doubts, Wordsworth “wanted to survive” by feeling “indispensable” (23). So toward the end of the poem, he “makes himself necessary to Dorothy, without being asked to, under a pretence of showing why she is necessary to him” (23; emphasis added). Because of such an unloving brother-sister relationship, Bromwich argues, there is “a touch of bad faith in the poem” (23). Obviously, in both Barrell’s and Bromwich’s readings, the image of the Romantic as a “prophet-seer,” “the rock of defence for human nature; an upholder and preserver, carrying everywhere with him relationship and love” (Wordsworth 738), is remorselessly shattered.

Much of the strong reaction to New Historicist and related critical readings of “Tintern Abbey,” naturally, can be understood as “rescues,” laborious at times, of Wordsworth’s moral character. There are, in brief, two main lines of defense. One is to counter the charge of “evasion of History” or of “betraying” radicalism, while the other is to show that Wordsworth genuinely loves Dorothy rather than “uses” her selfishly. Abrams and a host of other Romanticists are convinced that Wordsworth, at least as reflected in “Tintern Abbey,” has not turned away from his previous social concerns and retreated to solipsistic selfhood. His “cheerful faith” in nature, learnt painfully through “hearing oftentimes / The still, sad music of humanity” (90-91) will afford him future hopes and help him survive the post-French-Revolution depression. William Richey has pointed out that Wordsworth’s address to Dorothy “resembles some of the

8 See also Marlon B. Ross 406.
statements” in John Thelwall’s *The Rights of Nature*, reminding us that Thelwall, a radical British intellectual, “was struggling in the late 1790s to retain his political commitment” (212). For Thelwall, in order to fight for “British freedom” one must first recover from despairs, to “feel the importance of persevering fortitude” and be equipped with “a generous confidence and unanimity” (qtd. in Richey 212). Richey’s is apparently a “red” rewriting of Hartman’s earlier view that Wordsworth’s poetry “looks back in order to look forward the better” (*Wordsworth’s Poetry* 28-29). The final paragraph of “Tintern Abbey,” in this light, is not escapist but “a rededication to humanitarian concerns” (Richey 212). Furthermore, there is some similarity between the description of Dorothy’s future “solitude” and the treatment of the vagrant in “The Old Cumberland Beggar,” another poem collected in *Lyrical Ballads*, where the poet also recommends the healing power of nature. The subtle link between Dorothy and the vagrant, for Richey, is a testimony of Wordsworth’s unwavering social commitment.

The second line of defense, against the charge of Wordsworth’s alleged selfish exploitation of Dorothy, can be found in Richey, James Soderholm, Raymond Powell, and most recently, Heidi Thomson. Soderholm reminds us that, while some recent critics tend to see only solipsism, narcissism and patriarchism in Wordsworth’s apostrophic evocation of Dorothy in the poem, “early critics thought of the turn to [her] as a kind-hearted gesture and a socializing of the poet’s private myth of memory” (314). Bound by their “hermeneutics of suspicion” and obsessed with “betrayals, occlusions, and distances,” unsympathetic critics fail to see the genuine, intimate relations between the brother and sister (314). Powell argues that it is through Dorothy’s journals, “as well as through her own example,” that Wordsworth has learnt how to see the world afresh (690). As Wordsworth clearly expresses in his poem “The Sparrow’s Nest,” Dorothy has long sustained him through loving cares and teaching him to appreciate nature. However, even granted that the love between Wordsworth and Dorothy was genuine and reciprocal, Barrell’s and others’ feminist critique that during the Romantic Period there was obvious inequity between man and woman in terms of poetic power is still hard to deny. Dorothy is not exactly given a voice in the poem; she merely stands as the passive object receiving Wordsworth’s sermon and blessing. And it is, after all, Wordsworth who could become a poet laureate, not the writer of the Grasmere journals. To defend Wordsworth, one often finds it necessary to stress on the reciprocal

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9 Of this particular aspect of the “Tintern Abbey” debate, my discussion concludes roughly by the mid-1990s. For an update of more recent interpretations regarding the address to Dorothy in the poem, see Heidi Thomson.
relation between the brother and sister, and to take Dorothy as the representation of human community. For Richey, the last verse paragraph of “Tintern Abbey” is marked by a “sense of reciprocity,” for “Wordsworth continually weaves together the fates of himself and his sister, even as he imagines their separation” (215). Richey also reminds us of the sufferings which both the brother and the sister have gone through in their younger days, their separation and orphan-like existence. The ending of the poem is thus like two orphans “making a compact with one another,” “a social contract as it were” (215). Hence what we see is a “communal moment,” which prevents Wordsworth from “falling into an ‘abyss of idealism’” (216). Likewise, Thomson stresses on the idea of sharing, highlighting “the friendship and the sibling relationship” between Wordsworth and Dorothy instead of gender politics and “narcissistic projection” (542). The New Historicists might well question if Dorothy could indeed represent a “community” of all the vagrants, laborers, and the rural poor like Michael, yet they cannot deny Richey’s claim that Wordsworth is preparing to return to society, as to be confirmed by his “Poems Dedicated to National Independence and Liberty,” composed since 1802, and by his attempt to publish the political tract The Convention of Cintra in 1808 and 1809. Curiously, often the New Historicists would emphasize Wordsworth’s inner turn as the “suppression of the social,” ignoring his visibly active life after the “apostasy,” a successful career crowned with his international fame as a national bard and the most prominent among the “Big Six” of British Romantic poets.

II. Ambivalence, Rightfulness and Relevance: Aspects of the Ethics of Criticism

My discussion of the “Tintern Abbey” debate, up to this point, might have resembled a melodrama of “defending” and “rescuing” the author. Actually, more subtle ethical problems of criticism have been involved. The conflict of interpretations, as Siebers persuasively argues, is always implicated in ethical questions. The ethics of criticism encompasses our critical attitudes towards the author and other critics as well as the “attitudes engendered either consciously or unconsciously by particular theoretical stances” (Siebers 2). To put it most bluntly, there is a deep ambivalence in the New Historicist stance toward canonical writers like Wordsworth and their works. To one extreme, there is a keen sense of the critic’s superiority verging on aggressiveness:
the belief that one can transcend ideology, prescribe what the poet should or should not have written and see what the poet himself or herself fails to see. On the other pole are intricate apologies for studying the text and its author, both having been identified as morally suspect. Let me take McGann’s famous work *The Romantic Ideology* as an example, a book which has gained much recognition as the manifesto of New Historicist Romantic studies. Reading “Tintern Abbey,” McGann claims that “between 1793 and 1798,” the famous “five years” mentioned at the beginning of the poem, Wordsworth “lost the world merely to gain his own immortal soul” (88). At the same time, he announces that the critique of Wordsworth’s “Romantic ideology” as false consciousness and of his apostasy is not “an indictment of the poem’s greatness” (90). To follow the familiar logic of Romantic bardolatry, however, one is immediately confronted with an obvious contradiction. Can we, in short, belittle a prophet-seer’s thoughts while preserving the value of his work? As if to answer this difficult question, McGann explains that the greatness of the poem “lies in the clarity and candor with which it dramatizes not merely this event [of displacing harsh social reality], but the structure of this event” (88). And yet earlier on he also says that most readers have simply passed by the historical allusions in the poem “almost without notice” (86). If the average reader does not recognize such allusions, one would ask, how can we claim that the poem is great because of its alleged “clarity and candor” in dramatizing the unperceived “structure” of displacement? Drawing on Levinson’s polemical essay “Insight and Oversight: A Reading of ‘Tintern Abbey,’” McGann has dropped us some hints. He writes that “the force of lines 15-23 depends upon our knowing that the ruined abbey had been in the 1790s a favorite haunt of transients and displaced persons—of beggars and vagrants of various sorts” (86). He seems to be suggesting, in effect, that the “startling [...] contrast of social conditions,” on this reading, accounts precisely for the poem’s power. In other words, one way to appreciate the poem’s impact necessitates some minimal local knowledge aided by a certain symptomatic reading procedure, which enables the return of the repressed. And it is exactly because the average reader is unable to see the hidden History that the New Historicist intervention is much needed. A sense of critical hubris, arguably, goes with a self-serving move. The New Historicists have offended other Romanticists not only because they refuse to play the humble servants of the great Romantics, but they have also devalued “visionary” interpretations as “naïve” and complicit with a false consciousness, hence equally guilty of the “suppression of the social.” This raises the further ethical question as to whether the critical violence against more “traditional-minded” critics, and, by
extension, the average, “ignorant,” reader, is well justified.

Although there is an unmistakable obsession with the overtly public and political in the New Historicist approach to the Romantic canon, it would be wrong to allege that the New Historians are always blind to the aesthetic dimension of the text and try to evade the question of literary value altogether. Levinson’s detailed analysis of “Peele Castle” in her Wordsworth’s Great Period Poems tries to explain why “so formulaic a poem [is] so moving” and why this “decidedly anomalous work [is] regarded as central to the canon” (103). She has taken pains to explicate how the “façade” of “serene control evinced by the narrator” actually goes with a sublime language which “works with a cruel perseverance to discredit the manifest themes of the elegy and to disorder its thought” (103). She further hints that the force of the poem comes from its “strangely redundant energy,” and seeks to explain its dynamics “in terms of social contradiction and ideological necessity” (103).

David Simpson’s book Wordsworth’s Historical Imagination is an even better case in point, where he is exceptionally conscious of the need to explain what accounts for the greatness or main interest of Wordsworth’s poetry, albeit from a rather peculiar perspective. He states in his introduction that it is “most productive” to “regard the Wordsworthian subjectivity as a particular medium [...] that was, by virtue of its openness to the energies of language and experience, extraordinarily articulate about the pressures and tensions that we may with hindsight regard as central to the culture at large” (4). Simpson tries to develop, in a way symptomatic and sympathetic at once, what the early Hartman has referred to as Wordsworth’s “poetics of error” in an expressly social direction. He is able to tell us what is interesting about Wordsworth’s works: the complexity of thematic and psychological conflicts, the tensions, uncertainties, and displacements underlying what others might have dismissed hastily as mere Romantic “ideology,” self-deception or bad faith. At the same time, Simpson also appeals to the notion of representativeness, presumably to account for Wordsworth’s greatness: “Wordsworth’s articulation of these tensions and anxieties takes place in a language that so fully images and alludes to the public and political dimension that it becomes profoundly representative” (4). Whether this yoking of a psychoanalytic-poststructuralist insight with a classic Marxist-realist imperative amounts to a missalliance invites further examination. Reading “Tintern Abbey,” Simpson focuses on the tensions and doubts, rather than speculating on evasions and betrayals. Attending to the poetic language, Simpson highlights its negativity and tentativeness. He recognizes two “redemptive prospects” intimated at the end of the poem, “a recourse to nature and
the language of the sense” (112), and the “final turn toward the desperately limited version of the social world represented by Dorothy” (113). Unlike most “visionary” Romanticists, Simpson stresses that “Tintern Abbey” is “a poem of aspiration rather than achievement”:

The conviction of particular passages is unsettled by their contiguity to other passages, and by the general rhetoric of hypothesis. We see here neither the successful displacement of the social by the natural, nor the convincing subsumption of the natural within the social. On the contrary, the poem transcribes the speaker’s sense of reciprocal instability of both social and natural environments. (113)

This reading is a negation of the famous Wordsworthian dictum “love of nature leading to love of mankind” and, at the same time, a qualification of McGann’s and Levinson’s rather patronizing New Historicist critique. The portrait of the Romantic as a prophet-seer in full control of his meaning, at any rate, has already been tainted; instead of a eulogy of vision and achievement, we are to be content with unfulfilled yearnings. The simultaneous invocation of socio-linguistic representativeness and a peculiar “poetics of error,” coupled with the not “unromantic” rhetoric of sympathy in the critic, intimates a convoluted ethics of ambivalence and polyvalence.

Apart from raising the question of how to judge the author’s moral character fairly, the “Tintern Abbey” debate has also alerted us to a somewhat different, though ultimately connected, dimension of the ethics of criticism: what makes a “good” or “right” interpretation of the text? Or, in an alternative formulation, what criteria should we adopt when weighing the relative “merit” or “soundness” of rival readings of the same poem? Could they be, to follow the hermeneutical tradition, logical consistency of arguments, sufficiency of supports, comprehensive coverage of the text, faithfulness to authorial intention, or, to accommodate more recent trends, novelty of interpretation, theoretical sophistication, and social relevance? A closely related methodological consideration: what is to be counted as “in” the text? Can one which dwells on what is

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10 I have in mind particularly E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*. More philosophical discussions can be found in Paul Ricoeur’s prolific writings. The advent of deconstruction has certainly complicated the problematics of interpretation, a huge topic not discussed in any detail in my present essay. Insofar as judging the relative “merit” of different interpretations involves the notions of goodness and justice, and that such judgements are often related to moral judgements on the author, I include, if somewhat unconventionally, “rightfulness” in interpretation in my discussion of the “ethics” of criticism.
seemingly “outside” of the poem be a valid reading? How far should authorial intention, granted that it is indeed knowable, serve as the “anchor” of the meaning of the text? Two notable features of the New Historicism, in this regard, are the propensity for absence and the subtle reliance on authorial intention at the same time. In the words of Alan Liu, “what is there in a poem is precisely what is not there: all the history that has been displaced, erased, suppressed, elided, overlooked, overwritten, omitted, obscured, expunged, repudiated, excluded, annihilated, and denied” (556). This approach already presupposes the possibilities of securing some sort of intentionality in the text and recuperating what Levinson calls the “objective Real” in history (Liu 561). One has to ascertain to what historical reality the poem must be alluding in order to claim that the author willfully suppresses or, by virtue of some psychological defense mechanisms, unwittingly displaces such a reality. Curiously, despite the influence of deconstruction on some of its advocates, the New Historicist enterprise as a whole seems to be rather indifferent to such poststructuralist notions as undecidability and the centering of the self, as if questioning historical certainty and undermining the more or less unified self would weaken the force of such moral indictments as the author’s betrayal, disavowal and bad faith. With reference to the theoretical difficulty of transcending “Romantic ideology,” Steven Cole has aptly commented that the New Historicists can hardly “get from the ontological argument about social determination to the normative argument which is required in order to distinguish between truth and falsity,” that “the very description of ‘falsity’ presupposes the kind of free agency which historicism wants to deny, since a belief can be ‘false’ only if one had a choice to believe differently” (42). In what follows, I would like to shift the focus to the problems with New Historicist contextualization in relation to authorial intention and to the ontological question of what is to be considered “in” the text.

Reading “Peele Castle” in terms of “Napoleonic” political history, Levinson tries to associate “the death of John Wordsworth with the deaths of Marat, Robespierre, John Taylor, and Raisley Cavert,” and insists that Wordsworth “does not draw the arrow leading from private grief to public critique, because he does not, he cannot know this connection” (Great Period 12). She further claims: “Could Wordsworth have discovered the subtext of his poem—the associative logic whereby a devouring, autonomous Imagination is demonically doubled in the figure of Napoleon—he would have been in a position to connect the immediate occasion of ‘Peele Castle’ with the disproportionate repercussions of that tragedy” (Great Period 123). A question we
might ask is how the modern critic could be so sure of such “unsaid.” In response to Levinson’s conviction about the weightiness of political history over merely personal experience, Thomas McFarland argues persuasively that we can “hardly overestimate the personal depth of Wordsworth’s grief at his brother’s loss,” for that grief has engendered not only this particular poem but also at least five more “extraordinarily affecting poetic” works (30). Obsessed with the political import of Wordsworth’s sufferings, Levinson overlooks his more probable grief at the death of his own mother and father as well (McFarland 29).

As for “Tintern Abbey,” in order to explore possible political allusions there, Levinson stresses that “July 13, 1798” in the title “marked almost to the day the nine-year anniversary of the original Bastille Day” and “the five-year anniversary of the murder of Marat” (Great Period 16). McFarland ponders on this interesting “near-miss”:

It is impressive that the date is the fifth anniversary of Marat’s murder, but then what do we make of the fact that it was Robespierre’s, not Marat’s, death that sent Wordsworth into paroxysms of joy and thankfulness? That 13 July 1798 marked almost to the day the nine-year anniversary of the original Bastille Day is also intriguing, but it would have been vastly, even exponentially, more intriguing had that Bastille moment actually been 13 July, and not, forever and eternally, 14 July. To what extent does a near-miss qualify for parapractic use? And is nine years as good as ten? (4)

What he has raised, in effect, is a host of thorny problems about rightfulness in interpretation—the critical license of diverging from probable authorial intention, the appropriation of arguably “irrelevant” information outside the literary text, and the legitimacy of the critic’s claim to a superior knowledge denied to the author, to say the least. Full answers to these difficult questions, unfortunately, lie beyond the scope of the present study.

III. Ecocriticism and Social Relevance

The recent greening of British Romanticism has thrown the problem of social
relevance into even sharper relief. If the New Historicist excavation of traumatic history is a longing to fix the meaning of the text in terms of historical specificities even at the cost of sacrificing probable authorial intention, then recent ecocriticism can be seen as a daring move to go beyond the confines of biography, history, and geography in search of some contemporary global, environmental relevance. Jonathan Bate is most eloquent in his introduction to *Romantic Ecology*, where he reminds us of the demolition of the Berlin Wall and the anachronism of the “crude old model of Left and Right” (3), announcing the timeliness of greening:

The 1960s gave us an idealist reading of Romanticism which was implicitly bourgeois in its privileging of the individual imagination; the 1980s gave us a post-Althusserian Marxist critique of Romanticism. The first of these readings assumed that the human mind is superior to nature; the second assumed that the economy of human society is more important than [...] the “economy of nature.” It is precisely these assumptions that are now being questioned by green politics. (9)

For Bate, as for Karl Kroeber, a green approach to literary texts by such Romantic writers as Wordsworth is valid because they harbor some kind of “proto-ecological” views. More importantly, the greening of Romantic poems affords them strong contemporary social relevance, for it “brings Romanticism to bear on what are likely to be some of the most pressing political issues of the coming decade: the greenhouse effect and the depletion of the ozone layer, the destruction of the tropical rainforest, acid rain, the pollution of the sea [...]” (Bate, *Romantic Ecology* 9). So far as the pragmatic effects of literary criticism are concerned, Bate contends that the New Historicism’s “potential for wider political use [...] outside the academy” is very limited, whereas Romantic ecology serves much better to “politicize Romanticism [...] in a way that speaks to our present discontents” (8). One would not be surprised, therefore, to find such modern ecological concepts as “ecosystem,” “sustainable productivity” and the “Gaia hypothesis” figuring prominently in Bate’s recent reading of “Tintern Abbey” in *The Song of the Earth*, notions which are becoming increasingly familiar to us but would strike Wordsworth as rather alien. In Bate’s reading, “Tintern Abbey” celebrates “a cottage-economy which does not ‘disturb’ the ecosystem”; Wordsworth’s well-known “pantheism” is rewritten as the view that “the whole earth is a single vast, living, breathing ecosystem” (*Song of the Earth* 146). In James McKusick’s similar
reading of the poem, we have the oft-quoted lines “These hedge-rows, hardly hedge-rows, little lines / Of sportive wood run wild” (15-16) discussed with reference to the preservation of “biodiversity” rather than to the picturesque gaze or the enclosure of common fields (67). The clear statement in the poem that nature is “The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse, / The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul / Of all my moral being” (109-11) has been displaced. The appeal to probable authorial intention, in short, has already given way to contemporary social relevance. Even if Wordsworth is still lauded as the “High Priest” of nature, nature itself is now more likely to be seen in terms of ecosystems rather than as a mystic god-like presence.

Interestingly, while Bate’s reading of Wordsworth, having recourse to contemporary ecological discourse, foregrounds the global relevance of Wordsworth’s poetry, he has to emphasize “regional specificity” in Wordsworth’s nature poems in order to argue that his patriotism is rooted “in a tradition of local defence of liberty” rather than being “knee-jerk jingoism” (Song of the Earth 219, 215). Wordsworth’s “critical regionalism,” Bate tries to convince us, is opposed to a “Napoleonic, expansionist” imperialism “with an investment in the denigration and even extinction of other countries” (Song of the Earth 225). Let me return to the important issue of the global versus the local in the next section and proceed immediately to other difficulties of greening Romanticism.

The ethical imperative to respect nature and other living organisms, for example, does not exempt the critic from the need to identify literary value in “Tintern Abbey”; taking how close a poem conforms to some environmental ethics as the measure of its very greatness will not do. In other words, neither Aldo Leopold’s “land ethic” nor Paul Taylor’s “biocentric outlook on nature,” nor yet Naess and Sessions’s “deep ecology platform” can be readily translated into an ethic of literary criticism. The conviction that “a thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community” (Leopold 253), for instance, does not automatically guarantee that “a literary work is great when it celebrates the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community.” With respect to the tradition of Romantic bardolatry, merely proving Wordsworth is one of the important precursors of environmentalism could hardly sustain his status as a prophet-seer knowing much to teach the future generations. Moreover, the borrowing of the modern ecological discourse, often burdened with a technical, if not materialistic, lexicon, may be at odds with the humanist and quasi-theological heritage of Romanticism long familiar to us. The green reverence for all life forms, from the tiniest insects upward to the humans, is potentially leveling. If
we are to follow the deep ecologists, we are obliged to censure “anthropocentrism” and to forfeit much of Romantic hero worship, which is of course deeply and unapologetically anthropocentric. Methodologically, a few of Wordsworth’s pieces like “Nutting” are ideally suited for a green reading, yet others like “Tintern Abbey” pose acute interpretive problems.

The “Tintern Abbey” debate has highlighted a few highly controversial textual and thematic peculiarities, such as the palpable absence of the abbey, the less noticeable “evasion” of industry in the environs, and the role of Dorothy vis-à-vis Wordsworth and nature. To further explore the ethics of criticism in regard to Romantic ecology, let me return to Bate’s green reading of “Tintern Abbey” in *The Song of the Earth* and examine how he counters earlier negative criticism of the poem and renders Wordsworth into an exemplary “ecopoet.” Bate’s move is double-edged. On the one hand, Bate tries to save Wordsworth from New Historian and feminist attacks on his moral character; on the other, he expounds Wordsworth’s “ecopoiesis” by linking his linguistic style to an environmental ethic, thus explaining, presumably, the literary value of the poem. Bate sees “Tintern Abbey” as a subtle critique of the picturesque tradition popularized by Gilpin, with its anthropocentric re-envisioning of nature as art and its taste for ruins. Raymond Williams, one might still remember, has criticized the “conspicuous aesthetic consumption” of the “wild regions of mountain and forest” as objects by the leisurely picturesque tourist, whose journeys “came from the profits of an improving agriculture and from trade” (128). Bate adds that Wordsworth’s “posturing of the picturesque” reflects the Cartesian division of the mind from the body (*Song of the Earth* 141). The absence of the abbey from the poem is explained as a refusal to accept the “picturesque assumption that “artificial” features such as ruins [...] may be classed as part of nature” (144). Bates also suggests, intriguingly, that “Wordsworth has anticipated Adorno’s recognition that a taste for the picturesque ruins is likely to be imbued with reactionary politics” (144). Evading the abbey, he is thus able to free the poem of the conservative, imperialistic kind of nationalism. Citing Gilpin’s *Observations on the River Wye*, Bate reminds us that Gilpin “noted with surprise and delight that within half a mile of the site of the abbey there were great ironworks,” but “without any awareness of the environmental effects of mining and industry” (143). For the picturesque tourist, Bate argues forcefully, “impressive new industrial sites were objects of admiration just as much as ancient ruins and imposing cliffs” (143).

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11 For a good discussion, see Ralph Pite, particularly 368-73, for his green explication of “Nutting.”
Instead of trying to evade, as Levinson’s escapist thesis has us believe, the sordid history of industrialization, Wordsworth actually chooses to ignore the “industrial sublime” cherished in the picturesque tradition. Bate further attends to the controversial “wreaths of smoke / Sent up, in silence, from among the trees” (Wordsworth 17-18) and offers an ingenious green reading: as an ecopoet, Wordsworth’s “feeling of connectedness leads him to suppose that it might come not from the Cartesian ironwork observed by Gilpin but from the fires of ‘vagrant dwellers in the houseless woods,’” that is, gypsies as wise practitioners of “sustainable productivity,” “who know the moment when they have taken enough from a particular spot of earth and must therefore move on” (146).

As for the feminist complaint about Dorothy’s silence and passivity in the poem, Bate claims that “the supposedly higher faculties which woman is here denied are precisely those Cartesian presumptions with which we must do away if we are to save the earth” (Song of the Earth 150), hence her silence “is a sign not of condescending objectification, but of William’s respect for her attunement to the place” (151). Finally, the “language of tentative striving” with the “profusion of negative prefixes,” already noted by Simpson and others, is reinterpreted by Bate in terms of the “impossible” attempt to “speak the silence of the place”: “Tintern Abbey” is “as [...] close as any poem has ever reached to such a speaking” (151). While one might question Bate’s “masculine” appropriation of “ecofeminism,” his downplaying of Wordsworth’s anthropocentrism and his evasion of the obvious turn from tentativeness to affirmation toward the end of the poem, the very novelty of Bate’s green reinterpretation, his subtle responsiveness to earlier critics, and his due attention to literary value are admirable.

The bitter “Tintern Abbey” debate has already testified to us the dire necessity of defending the moral character of writers, in spite of all the talk of intertextuality and death of the author. After the New Historicism, it would no longer be easy to idolize Romantic poets like Wordsworth “naively” as prophet-seers transcending history and ideology. Some sort of ethics of ambivalence and polyvalence, as we have found in Simpson for example, might well be unavoidable and need not be dismissed as “bad faith” right away. Given that the question about the emancipatory potentials of historicizing the British Romantic canon and of critiquing “Romantic ideology” is still unresolved, one might as well plead for a certain hospitality or gentleness to Wordsworth in literary studies. In this light, recent Romantic ecocriticism does appear to be a timely comer. The greening of Wordsworth will not, of course, immediately solve the
knotty questions I have raised with reference to different approaches to “Tintern Abbey,” but it has made at least two significant contributions to our discussion of the ethics of criticism. First, the environmental ethics, with its leanings toward equity and tolerance, implies a dilution of Romantic bardolatry but perhaps also, if somewhat paradoxically, a healthy respect for the author. Second, Romantic ecology, as opposed to the New Historicist obsession with local, traumatic political and economic histories, prioritizes contemporary global relevance of criticism and seems to have paved the way toward a greater freedom of reading.

IV. The Local and the Global: Reading “Tintern Abbey” Today

In what follows, I would like to shift our discussion gradually to the politics of space in light of the recent scholarship of Doreen Massey and Pat Jess. I wish to demonstrate that ecocriticism, with its propensity to the universal or global, has yet to wrestle with some thorny problems on the local scene, if contemporary social relevance must be duly respected. Stylistically, the most remarkable feature of “Tintern Abbey” is perhaps its obvious lack of local color so far as descriptive details are concerned, in stark contrast to the attention to local flora and fauna one finds in John Clare’s poetry. The full title does specify the date and location of the revisit (“Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour, July 13, 1798”), which has been open to a great deal of New Historicist political speculation. Despite the frequent use of the deictic expressions like “this,” “these,” and “that,” the poem itself proceeds with mostly general descriptions: the “steep and lofty cliffs,” the “quiet of the sky,” the “hedge-rows, hardly hedge-rows,” the “delightful stream,” and the “beauteous forms” ill-defined (5, 8, 15, 150, 23). The abbey is not depicted at all, while the River Wye is transformed through mythological association into a nymph, “wanderer thro’ the woods” (56). Nor are the emotions given concrete contents: “unremembered pleasure,” “that serene and blessed mood,” “arching joys,” and “dizzy raptures” (31, 41, 84, 85) are all rather vague. Even the most concrete descriptions like “evil tongues,” “rash judgments,” “the sneers of selfish men,” and “the dreary intercourse of daily life” (128-31), it would seem, bear no marked cultural specificities. Although the final part of the poem is addressed to Dorothy, the poet’s sister, the reader does not need to know much about her to
appreciate his finding in her “wild eyes” his former self and the wish that “this green pastoral landscape” (119, 158) will bless her even at his absence. In short, minimal knowledge about the Wordsworth’s lives or the history of the locale is presumed in the reader. Given the “global” character of the poem, no wonder earlier critics from Keats to Abrams often read it with reference to general notions like nature and subjectivity, or to such universal human concerns as sufferings and hopes.12

However, the picture is inevitably complicated if we, while reading “Tintern Abbey,” attend also to the recent struggle between some local residents in the Wye valley and the newcomers who apparently champion the cause of environmentalism. The conflicts between local farmers and a group of writers, artists and musicians there can be traced back to the early 1990s. In 1993, When Bob and Cilla Greenland, a local couple, planned to turn the fifteenth century Pilstone Farm into a farm for tourists, “selling locally raised lamb and pork, with a restaurant, craft shop and [...] car park” (Dunn 137), they were confronted by a media campaign against their project. To the more educated newcomers to the Wye, the place is one of the last pastoral paradises which must be guarded against any form of development. As with Wordsworth, they are attracted by the place because they see it as one of seclusion and spiritual restoration. Interestingly, apart from this artistic “colony” of new settlers, some campaigners at the time were obvious “outsiders” who opposed the change simply because they cherished some environmentalist ideals. In the words of Bob Greenland:

Some of the people complaining hadn’t even seen the place [...]. They described it as an unspoiled 15th-century farmhouse when half of it’s a rather hideous modern building which we want to improve. They quoted Wordsworth when once the Wye Valley was highly-industrialised with iron works, charcoal works, all sorts of things. It’s now a major tourist

12 In his monumental study Wordsworth’s Poetry, Hartman puts forth the famous “via naturaliter negativa” thesis, claiming that nature plays “an essential though self-transcending role” in Wordsworth’s “unsteady growth into self-consciousness” (xiii, xvi). Aided by nature, Wordsworth ultimately goes beyond nature to gain “unviolent regeneration” of his soul (30). The early Harold Bloom, with a less solipsistic emphasis, focuses on the benign “principle of reciprocity between the external world and [the] mind” (132) and the “personal myth of memory as salvation” (140). Despite his “misgivings and the ultimate fear of mortality,” Wordsworth, through memories of Nature’s presence, which offer him serenity and affection, is able to maintain his faith (140). Abrams reiterated in the 1980s in a similar vein that “Tintern Abbey” is “a lyric meditation on what it generally is for a human being to grow older and, inevitably, to experience vicissitude, disappointment, and dismay,” as John Keats had also recognized (384). These interpretations offer us a general picture of healing, human relationship and the belief in nature, and have been seen by some critics as a “legacy of comfort.”
What Greenland is arguing here, in effect, is that the Wye valley was no longer an idyll even before William and Dorothy Wordsworth came there in 1798 as some kind of “picturesque tourists” looking for “wild secluded” scenes (6), supposedly to lighten “the heavy and the weary weight / Of all this unintelligible world” (137). This is by no means to deny that, for “worshipper[s] of Nature” (152), this “green pastoral landscape” can help sustain their “cheerful faith” in nature as the “guide, the guardian of [their] heart, and soul / Of all [their] moral being[s]” (110-11) and restore their spiritual health. The new question being raised is how much we must respect local inhabitants’ different conception of the place and, when their livelihood might be at stake, whether we should grant them more rights to the place.

For Massey and Jess, Pilstone farm is an ironic case. Contrary to the classic example of the local people resisting the influence of the global process of modernization, here the proposed new development is not a very modern one (farm for tourists) and the opponents are either “privileged” new settlers or utter outsiders. Those who hold a more “mundane” view of the place earn their livings locally, “either in tourist-orientated businesses or through farming” (Jess and Massey 139), while the “Romantic” new settlers or occasional visitors might have constructed the idyllic image of the place elsewhere, perhaps when reading “Tintern Abbey.” As Massey and Jess contend, “the view of this local area as quiet, secluded, contemplation of nature is constructed and claimed by non-locals out of their own very present reasons for being there and (perhaps) an intermittent, or a selective, interpretation of history,” and this Romantic view works by denying the current locals’ perhaps more realistic view of the place “as a mixture of tourism and farming” (140). Ironically, a form of anthropocentrism with an arguably exclusionist leaning could be found in the professed supporters of environmentalism. What this case has starkly demonstrated is that eco-criticism cannot always “transcend” contemporary local struggles: a well-intentioned green way of reading Wordsworth might be enmeshed in a politics of representation and be perceived as oppressive to some people whose lives are, in a sense, much closer to nature. For green Wordsworth scholars, it is not as easy as it might seem at first sight to take sides, having in mind Wordsworth’s own apparent sympathy for

13 William first visited the Wye valley and Tintern Abbey alone in 1793. He revisited the place with Dorothy in 1798, beginning their “four-day ramble through the Wye valley from Bristol” (Curtis 112).
If “visionary” Romanticism has been accused of evading the harsh reality of social conflicts, much the same thing can be said of the popular kind of ecocriticism immensely influenced by deep ecology and the wilderness movement, which concerns itself primarily with the change in attitude toward nature or personal choices regarding lifestyle in a post-industrial consumer society. A more thoroughgoing environmentalism, Ramachandra Guha and J. Martinez-Alier suggest, must directly challenge Western “systems of production or distribution,” “questioning its socio-ecological basis” (18). Green thoughts, in this light, need not preclude traditional “red” concerns. With this in mind, while celebrating “sustainable productivity” of the “pastoral farms” and environmentally-friendly “vagrant dwellers in the houseless woods” in “Tintern Abbey” with Bate, we should not completely forget that the vagrants we now romanticize are also victims of some dark social forces. So far our critical review has raised a number of difficult questions concerning the practice of criticism which are still highly relevant today. My purpose is not to point out the theoretical “weaknesses” of each critical approach to the poem but to demonstrate the very complexity of the “ethical” questions involved. Having reframed the acrimonious Tintern Abbey debate in terms of the ethics of criticism, I hope further dialogues will be opened and in fruitful ways.

Works Cited

14 I am by no means arguing that the Greenlands are indeed as poor and helpless as people like Michael in Wordsworth’s poetry. My focus here is the rights to a place. In the third world context, on the other hand, the gap between the champions of Western-style environmentalism and the rustic poor, in terms of cultural and economic power, is obviously much more obvious, as is apparent in Ramachandra Guha and J. Martinez-Alier’s analysis.

15 To be exact, the main focus of Guha and Martine-Alier is not social inequities in the West but the environmentalists’ general oversight of Western capitalism’s exploitation of the third world, “its enormous dependence on the lands, peoples and resources of other parts of the globe” (18). To envision a better world, the lopsided emphasis on the “protection of pristine, unspoilt nature” as a “reservoir of biological diversity and enormous aesthetic appeal which serves as an ideal (if temporary) haven from the urban workaday world” (20) is not enough. Invoking Guha and Martine-Alier’s “third world critique” here, however, I only wish to stress that ecocriticism does not necessarily go against traditional Leftist concerns. We have yet to see how “green” and “red” interpretations of the poem might be synthesized.


Kroeber, Karl. *Ecological Literary Criticism: Romantic Imagining and the Biology of*

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