

Romantic Poetry and the Limits of Explication

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PERHAPS THE MOST FREQUENT complaint of students studying poetry is that the process of analyzing or interpreting poetic language takes away from the pleasure of reading it. It is an argument which in its naive sense is fairly easy to counter. We say that a reading of a poem is inevitably an interpretation of it, and that in closely analyzing it we are simply extending the process of reading and deepening the pleasure to be gained. As a reply this seems unexceptionable, and it is surely the case that a truly close reading enables us to take greater possession of the experience the text is offering us. And yet most teachers will have had the all too frequent experience of working through a poem with students, paying close attention to the detail of the text, only to be left at the end with something totally inert, as if the poem has died under their hands. Someone, we may be sure, will quote at us Wordsworth's warning "we murder to dissect,"¹ and despite the ease with which this may be thrown at anyone engaged in critical enquiry, it is a charge that sticks perennially to teachers of literature. The suspicion that we are interfering with the texts rather than enhancing them is part of the guilty luggage that as teachers we carry about with us, rather like those comically pathetic pedants of the Academy of Lagado with their sacks on their backs containing the dead things they have substituted for a living language.

There is a sense in which the anxiety I am talking about is particularly acute in reading Romantic poetry. This is partly because the imaginative appeal of the poetry is so strong that it exceeds what we are sometimes able to say about it, and yet our critical procedures often seem committed to the notion of the

total explicability of the text. The Romantics are, however, continually telling us that there are things which defy analysis. Indeed, a fundamental assumption of Romanticism is that experience transcends understanding, not in the sense that there is too much of it to be intelligently comprehended but in the far more challenging sense that it is quintessentially "other" to the processes of human comprehension. To see this is to approach one of the central dilemmas of Romanticism, namely, how is it possible to explain or account for that which by its very nature resists attempts at explication? This is why it lays so much characteristic stress on visionary and hypernormal states of perception: they are conditions of encounter not subject to the normal closures of the rational mind. It is also why the crisis points for much Romantic verse come at precisely those moments when the mind, instead of registering the shock of experience begins to shape it too manifestly. It is not so much feeling joy which is important to Wordsworth and the Romantic poets as the capacity continually to be "surprised" by it.

In Book V of *The Prelude* Wordsworth, after lamenting the failures of much contemporary education expresses a wish for "Knowledge not purchased by the loss of power!" (l. 425). The attempt to acquire such knowledge, and the sad recognition that it often involves "the loss of power," is a recurring feature of Romanticism. But it is also a recurring feature of the reader's own experience. One cannot claim that students who say a Blake lyric or Wordsworth sonnet defy analysis are really saying anything original or profound. At the same time, however, they are not valueless comments. If we extend the point they become genuine insights. We can perceive them as saying that there is about the poems something which is not itself the object of thought, something which cannot be known, but which is the reason we know what we do about the texts. It is Wordsworth's or Blake's "power" they are responding to, that element which brings into being the poems as a whole and which constitutes the complete mode of their existence. To say this is to relate the experience of readers to the concerns of the poetry itself. For Romantic verse is continually speculating about the existence of some power that generates perception but which cannot itself be

perceived. Terms like "wise passiveness" or "negative capability" describe the process by which that perception comes into being but not its origin.

Much of the uniqueness of Romantic poetry lies in its almost exclusive concern with the dynamics of its own origin. As such it foregrounds what is perhaps always present in the creative process. Any truly memorable poem impresses us with the sense of something that eludes critical articulation. It is only because of this that analysis continues to be possible, otherwise the poem would be exhausted by our attentions and would cease to be read. The significance of Romantic poetry is that the idea of the incomprehensible is fundamental to its procedures and an inherent part of its perceptions about reality. Because of this it poses the greatest challenge to forms of analysis which take their cue from semiotics. The text can only be considered as a form of communication in so far as what it has to say can be translated into known and accepted cognitive patterns. But if poems are unique utterances, totally individual linguistic events then the experiences they offer can be found nowhere else; the language of communications can have no vocabulary for them. The only vocabulary exists in the poetry in the form that it is.

The paradoxes of communication and the difficulty of explicating the seemingly inexplicable are principal preoccupations of the Romantic poets. They generate, for example, the complex subtleties of Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn." It is the power of art to affect us more than we can adequately account for that Keats's poem ponders. The urn, Keats says, can "express / A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme": and the wording is quite particular here.² It is not that the urn has more to express in quantitative terms than the poem, but that it is able to do it "more sweetly." It is the indefinable beauty of the urn, its negative capability, which is the centre of Keats's rapt contemplation. "[U]nheard" melodies are "sweeter," not because they differ notationally from heard music but because they are encountered in a dimension that renders them so, and one moreover that is beyond normal communication. The urn "tease[s] us out of thought" not simply by baffling thought but by taking us beyond it.

Keats's mode of attention, his way of "reading" the urn, is close to the way the reader encounters the poem. The opening lines describing the urn could be describing the poem Keats is writing about it; it too is "still," fixed on the page before us, it too is untarnished by time, always bride-like because always to be experienced for the first time. Like the urn it exists in "silence," and yet paradoxically it has something to say; its sweetness is similarly unheard. The peculiar resonance of the poem lies in the way it is debating the status of its own existence and as such, including the reader's experience as part of its argument. Interestingly, Keats's attention is not in any way analytic. There is nothing about the formal or structural properties of the urn. His gaze is if anything almost childlike in its inquisitiveness — "What maidens loth? . . . Who are these coming to the sacrifice?" The extraordinary idea of the town's eternal emptiness is of the kind that suggests the baffled wondering simplicity of the child. The very shape of the poem, its lack of resolution, its questions that cannot be answered, indicate the existence of something too large to be comprehended.

If we ask what that is, it surely has to do with Keats's desire to experience the perfection of the urn at a deeper level than that of conscious articulation. The driving urgency of the poem is his desire to become the urn, to interiorize its wholeness. Keats's desire is to penetrate beyond language, to lift the veil of *Moneta* ("The Fall of *Hyperion*"), and reach a level of pure experience. It is the moment when, in Virginia Woolf's words, "we are parts of the work of art. . . . we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself."³ The impossibility of this total identification except as a momentary imaginative event is what Keats thinks endlessly about. Beauty haunts us, the poem suggests, because it is forever out of reach. Works of art cannot be possessed. Indeed, for Keats, the moment of possession is the moment of loss: beauty is truth turns on the instant to beauty is untruth.

Possession precipitates loss. For Keats the dynamics of the imagination are both creative and destructive, and the natural paradigm for this is the cyclic pattern of the seasons — "Nature's law," as he calls it in "*Hyperion*" (l. 181). This perhaps helps to explain the relative flatness of the last stanza of "Ode on a

Grecian Urn": this is Keats's moment of possession, the point at which the urn has become known and reduced to a message. The problem with the "Beauty is truth, truth beauty," formula is not that it is opaque — its resonance through the years is evident witness of its ability to stimulate if not to satisfy thought — but in the fact that Keats has to say it at all. For the power of Keats's poem lies not in his ability to talk about beauty but to demonstrate it. It is not what the urn *says* that is important but what it *does*. The point at which the meaning of the urn becomes clear is the point at which it is lost. But because it will "remain, in midst of other woe" it can always be recovered, and as for the reader, he can always return to the opening of the poem.

What Keats does in his poem is to transform the urn from an object into a subject: to give it the force and presence of a living entity. To do this involves a certain sleight of hand but it acknowledges an important emotional truth: that whilst the art object may be fixed and dead it nevertheless has the mystery and power of something living. Romantic poetry is in its various ways continually attempting to change the relationship between perceiver and perceived, to make us see "thro" and not "with . . . the Eye."⁴ For Keats the process is a tragic one since the "otherness" of beauty must always exclude us. The case is somewhat different however for Wordsworth. Like Keats, he also contemplates a power in experience that resists comprehension but unlike Keats its presence is for Wordsworth an indication that life is not tragically patterned. The quintessential "otherness" of living forms is a guarantee of our own. "Points have we all of us within our souls / Where all stand single," Wordsworth says in *The Prelude* (III, 185-86), and for Wordsworth it is the experience of singleness, of total uniqueness, which is the true drive of all organic life.

If we see Wordsworth's poetry as attempting to talk about that which is beyond conscious articulation, which can be felt but not made into an object of knowledge we can enter as readers into the enormous ambition of his work. If he ultimately fails it is because there is no way in which he could really succeed. Indeed, there is a sense in which we suspect him at precisely those moments in which he seems to be most secure. What most modern

readers admire in him is the tentative thoughtfulness that often lies behind his most grand moments. It is there, as Geoffrey Durrant has noted,⁵ in the central passage from "Tintern Abbey" where Wordsworth tries to be as specific as possible about what he has felt in nature:

And I have felt
 A presence that disturbs me with the joy
 Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
 Of something far more deeply interfused,
 Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
 And the round ocean and the living air,
 And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
 A motion and a spirit, (ll. 93-100)

It is easy to feel that Wordsworth is imposing on himself and on the reader here by a vague rhetorical grandeur. But the passage is carefully and deliberately composed around certain paradoxes: a joy that "disturbs," a power which is in "motion" and yet is settled, "dwelling," which needs the imagery of height, "elevated," and depth, "deeply interfused," to express it, and which engages the emotions and the mind. Each of these statements is discrete and yet builds on the others. It is when we come to ask what Wordsworth is really talking about that the difficulties arise. Terms like "organic unity" or "pantheism" spring to mind, but it is precisely to avoid such labels that Wordsworth has striven so deliberately. He has various attempts himself at saying what it is — "presence . . . sense sublime . . . something . . . motion . . . spirit" — none of which have any secure meaning. It is impossible for the reader to be sure about precisely what is being said, and that difficulty is surely basic to the meaning of the experience Wordsworth is trying to share with us. Our difficulty in understanding it is related to the poet's difficulty in writing about it. We are made to share a common sense of limited comprehension, of a central obscurity that exists despite attempts to dispel it and which is powered by an emotional not a cognitive truth — "And I have felt." The meaning of the passage exists not despite its uncertainty, but because of it.

What Wordsworth is attempting in this passage is to turn that which generates feeling and thought into an object of thought.

The impossibility of doing that completely is part of the power of Wordsworth's statement. Indeed, it is an essential ingredient in all his experiences of the sublime. One can only attempt to talk about that which is inconceivable by using known categories of comprehension: personification, emblem, religious analogue. To do that is to run the risk of simply labelling it. Even here, the risk is run in a line such as "Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns," which in its anthropomorphism echoes rather too closely traditional religious sentiment. The problem for Wordsworth is how to articulate that which is fundamentally untranslatable, which can only exist in the form in which it is originally experienced. It is a problem that exists whether the poet is writing about nature experiences or encounters with people. Wordsworth's people are rarely, if ever, characters. He is not really interested in character traits, in those elements, that is, that make someone recognizable and knowable. His concern is with that which resists being known, and which remains to challenge us precisely because of that. Wordsworth's solitary figures are all fundamentally remote and mysterious, they do not yield up the secret of their being even to the poet's meditative gaze. In fact, it is always possible that Wordsworth has misread them, but the possibility only exists because the poet has first of all created a powerful sense of their essential independence. The indeterminacy of their characters is dependant on the very power with which Wordsworth invests their existence. In a sense the girl in "The Solitary Reaper" does not exist at all, and yet her presence pervades the poem right from the opening line: "BEHOLD her, single in the field." The tone of command with its hint of Biblical authority, the implication of "BEHOLD," suggesting a certain quality of attention, and the force of "single," create the object of attention for us as a living presence existing now — the present tense is important here. We are never allowed to know her and yet her reality is all the greater for not being penetrated.

Similarly with the leech gatherer. Wordsworth manages in "Resolution and Independence" to suggest far more by exclusion than inclusion of character detail. The leech gatherer remains essentially unknowable. Wordsworth's questions "How is it that you live, and what is it you do?" (st. xvii, l. 119) go unanswered

as do Keats's in the "Ode on a Grecian Urn." The refusal of experience to yield precise answers is the clue to much of the urgency that lies behind both poems. In "Resolution and Independence" it is initially a cause for anxiety — Wordsworth is oppressed as in Book VI of *The Prelude* by "thoughts of what and whither, when and how" (l. 630) — but through the agency of the old man it eventually becomes a cause for reassurance. It is Wordsworth's implicit recognition that experience resists comprehension because it transcends it that powers the ending of the poem. As such the poem takes a risk, but it is one that is fundamental to what it is essentially doing. The images of the huge stone, the strange sea beast, and the large cloud, seem in some ways comically inappropriate to the deformed old man, but the point is that the man's intense singleness of being can only be registered by techniques that unrealize him as a literal object and which invest him with the status of a subject. Wordsworth's concern after all, despite the title of the poem, is not so much with easily identifiable qualities such as endurance or humanity, but with something the man possesses as an impersonal natural fact. It is what is being enacted through him that is important.

And thus the uncertainty which surrounds the encounter — the qualifications "seemed" and "as if." Indeed, as a number of critics have noted, most of Wordsworth's intense moments of perception are characterized by uncertainty. It is this which helps to guarantee for us the reality of his experiences. The Wordsworthian awe contains a sense of vulnerability, of being caught off guard in a world only dimly apprehended. The boy out bird nesting, clinging to "the perilous ridge" hears a "strange utterance" in the sound of the wind while, Wordsworth says, "the sky seemed not a sky / Of earth — and with what motion moved the clouds!" (I. 336-39). But we are not told, nor can we be sure from the episode itself what it is that the wind utters: the message is untranslatable. The sense, however, of something recognized but not completely explicable is unmistakable. Brian Cosgrove has commented on the importance of the "uncanny" in Wordsworthian poetry, and on the way in which experiences hover between the preternatural and the supernatural.⁶ They do so necessarily:

the sense of ambivalence is the ground of their existence. The tremendous effort behind Wordsworth's poetry lies in his attempt to make these experiences the object of thought, to try and discover in them something of the shape and meaning of life; to remove, in other words, the uncertainty. And it is surely here that the chief strain exists in his more ambitious poems. A good deal of the pain in Wordsworth's poetry has to do with his realization that the growth of understanding is founded on loss, that intellectual certainty is achievable only at a tremendous cost. Running through *The Prelude* is a tussle between Wordsworth's attempts to be faithful to the experiences he has had, to express the extraordinary power and resonance of them, and on the other hand an anxious zeal to make them mean something precise. It is the struggle to do this that makes the poem such a humanly moving work, but all too often Wordsworth falls back on a kind of secure knowledge that seems too easily achieved. Invocations to the "Wisdom and Spirit of the universe" (I. 401), "the immortal spirit" (I. 340), and "the Upholder of the tranquil soul" (III. 117), signal a distinct loss of power. The problem, as Wordsworth came to realize, is that the "philosophic mind" ("Immortality Ode," st. x, l. 190) with its mental shorthand, damages the experiences it feeds off.

Much of the distinctiveness then, as well as much of the inherent strain of Romantic poetry lies in its attempt to use language in order to go beyond it. It tries characteristically, by evocation, suggestion, and ambiguity to return us to the full reality of unmediated experience, to initiate us into a world of pure being. The impossibility of this is implicit in the attempt, but the intimation of such a world haunts us in the words on the page. For Keats its existence is a necessary fiction, a "belle dame sans merci," no sooner possessed than lost, whilst for Wordsworth it is the underlying grammar of all life. For the reader of the poetry, it is present in the process of its attempted recovery which is synonymous with the process of its articulation. There is a sense in which language stands in a special relationship to experience in Romantic poetry: words are events, not simply in the Stanley Fish sense in which all words are, but in the more particular way in which they become their meaning. When Keats wishes in

"Sleep and Poetry" for "ten years, that I may overwhelm / Myself in poesy; so that I may do the deed / That my own soul has to itself decreed" (ll. 96-98), it looks as though he is wishing for time to indulge himself in all the luxuries he goes on to describe. But what he wants is to read and eventually to write about them. For Keats writing is doing. But of course it never is. Words are continually bearing witness to their own inadequacies as carriers of experience. A good deal of Keats's anxiety as a poet surely has something to do with this. The intensity with which he loads his language is a measure of his desire to penetrate beyond words. But although he may try and join with the nightingale on "the viewless wings of Poesy" (st. iv, l. 33), the wings of language are not real, the escape can only be mental: words are secondary events. As Wordsworth realized in the "Preface to the Lyrical Ballads," poetic language inevitably recollects emotion, and as such carries within it the fact of loss. When Wordsworth says "BEHOLD her, single in the field," the extra liveliness of the line comes from the fact that what we are told to do is impossible; it is a fiction we entertain and one which is compounded for us by the fiction of the present tense. We know that the experience is over, its recovery in poetic form enriches it, but that enrichment is founded on the implicit awareness of loss.

The kind of loss I am talking about is perhaps fundamental to all poetry, but it is with Romantic poetry that it becomes important in the total sensibility and organization of the poems themselves. One of the things which haunts this poetry is a glimpsed lost identity between words and events. In early oral cultures words were power: poems in the form of rituals and chants brought rain, healed diseases, and punished enemies. Swift may laugh at the professor in the Academy of Lagado who believes he can get his students to learn by making them swallow pieces of paper with calculations written upon them, but the point is that such behaviour is only ludicrous within a highly literate culture. To one with considerable oral residue it would not seem so strange. The oral connection even of literate language, however, remains strong: we still talk, for example, of eating our own words. Primary oral cultures preserve a sense of the word as part of the object it relates to. Such a perspective belongs to a world

view which is fundamentally mythic, in which nature and language are not totally separate entities. Poetic metaphor carries within it the echo of such a world, in which nature is endowed with meaning not as a literary device but because it is semantically conceived; in which the descriptive word gives life to the object because it is part of it. It is as if one were to be inside the poem.

The poet who strives for the closest relationship between word and event is surely Blake. For Blake, poetry is not recollection or re-enactment, it is the thing itself, *vision*: the eternal *now* in which the divisions of past and future and subject and object are overcome. The purpose behind the writing of *Jerusalem* is to establish the city in the very act of composition. This is why Blake lays so much stress on divine inspiration, because the language needed to accomplish the task has to be of a very special nature. Much of the ambiguity and syntactic irregularity in Blake's verse is due to his attempt to create a lyric identity between word and event and give a new potency to poetic language. The opening of "Tyger," for example, gains a good deal of its force from the fact that the word "Tyger" does not operate simply as a name. In Blake's usage there lies an echo of the world in which the name of an object shares its power; to know the name is to have access to it. The first line, with its rhythmic repetition is incantatory — whatever we understand by "Tyger" is being conjured into existence. From the beginning then, Blake's tiger exists, not as it might do in a Keats or Wordsworth poem as something being contemplated, but rather as something being invoked. As such, the poem's procedures reflect the world of primary orality. In "What dread hand? & what dread feet?" we can hear the background of necromancy and the casting of spells, and in "burning bright" and "forests of the night," the nursery rhyme mnemonics of childhood. Blake's poem penetrates the veil of the written language and captures the greater freedom and mystery of the spoken word. It implicitly asks whether we know what is meant by that neutral label "Tyger," and in so doing takes us into a realm in which our sense of established discrete identities is subverted by an overwhelming reality. The repeated questions, the lack of resolution, the circular movement, the

ambiguity of tone and suggestion all enact the insufficiency of the human mind and the insufficiency of language with its "fearful symmetr[ies]," to comprehend the actuality of the tiger. Blake's poem attempts to raise us to the level of vision in which the tiger exists, not as the literal animal created by a logically insistent creator, but as one of the "portions of eternity" (*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, p. 151). The imagination does not recollect nature, it redeems it: "As a man is, So he Sees" (letter to Dr. Trusler, p. 793).

A view of poetry as vision creates all kinds of difficulties for both poet and reader alike. This is largely because language imposes its own formal hierarchic structures on visionary utterance. We expect a certain agreement between the various elements of a sentence even when they are subject to the deviations of poetic form: the assumptions of language, in other words, are inevitably rational. Blake's principal attack, however, is on the rational mind and its habit of conceptualizing experience. We find, not infrequently, in Blake that his verbs have several different subjects, or that tenses are mixed in what seems an obscure way. Even in "Tyger," the line "What dread hand? & what dread feet?" is logically adrift in the poem. Because of the way in which Blake has revised it there is no verb to complete the sense. And yet we do not read it as meaningless. The very suppression of any rational context suggests the presence of something too frightening and awesome to articulate. A more puzzling syntactic problem, however, is to be found in "Ah, Sun-flower":

Ah, Sun-flower, weary of time,
 Who countest the steps of the Sun,
 Seeking after that sweet golden clime
 Where the traveller's journey is done:
 Where the Youth pined away with desire,
 And the pale Virgin shrouded in snow
 Arise from their graves, and aspire
 Where my Sun-flower wishes to go. (p. 215)

There are of course a number of peculiarities here, not least the fact that the poem has no main verb. It consists of a number of subordinate verbs which leave the opening clause hanging: a sense of incompleteness is present in the very form of the poem.

But more than that. There is a semantic problem about the "Where[']s" of the fourth and eighth lines. The poem reads as though the "Youth" and the "Virgin" are already in the place to which they are aspiring to go. If they "Arise from their graves" in the "sweet golden clime," how can they still "aspire" to go there? And yet again, we do not experience this as simply confusing. The effect of the involved syntax is to prevent the reader from interpreting the poem as a piece of consecutive reasoning. Those "Where[']s" seem to be definite, and yet they are not, they lead back into one another with a puzzling indefiniteness.

The perception which generates "Ah, Sun-flower," is from within the experience that it so powerfully evokes: the "Where[']s" dissolve our sense of time and place for a purpose. The "sweet golden clime" is only *apparently* a place, to see it with the eye of vision is to see it as a condition. Eternity, for Blake, exists not outside of time in some future land of perfection — to see it like that is to become trapped in a wearisome longing — but inside time. The youth and virgin are already potentially in the place they wish to go to; what is needed for its realization is the kind of energy suggested by the imagery of resurrection, "Arise from their graves" — the shedding of the old primary selves and the emergence of new, more positive ones. But it is a condition, or state of being, which cannot be attained finally or completely — to see it like that is still to see it as a place. It is always in the process of being created; we simultaneously experience it and aspire towards it. Blake calls it living "in eternity's sun rise" (p. 179). Within the disruption of the normal semantic pattern there lies a deep internal logic of an entirely different order. To perceive it is to engage in a radical act, because for Blake perception is action: "The wisest of the Ancients," he says, writing to Trusler "consider'd what is not too Explicit as the fittest for Instruction, because it rouses the faculties to act" (p. 793).

Blake is a poet for whom everything is present at the moment of writing. The immediacy of the poems, their extraordinary range of implication, are the products of a mind which refuses to see the normal divisions of experience. We cannot really be sure what the tiger, the sunflower, or the rose really are because

the pressure of the poems is to dissolve our sense of them as having any definable status in time or place. To label them as symbols or emblems is to assume a level of subordination to some notional reality that Blake works to undermine. They are not remote in a world of mysterious "otherness," but rather very close to us with a peculiarly disturbing intimacy. The opening of "Ah Sun-flower," with its powerful note of infinite regret and wistful longing creates an identity between speaker, reader, and flower which is the source of much of the poem's power: there is nothing between us and the experience. Blake's universe is deeply mythic: man contains the entire world within himself. To perceive that is to overcome the perils of single vision in which objects are locked in space and time, each in their separate universes and to see the ultimate unity of all life. Blake's mode of writing is liberationist — to make the reader arise from his grave and "aspire."

The enormous strain which this puts on language is evident from the numerous commentaries on Blake's poetry. Words are not particularly good at expressing the nature of a reality which exists beyond them. It is also evident from the course that Blake's own poetry took. A visionary apprehension of things must chafe at the enforced accommodation to accepted syntax, rhyming patterns, and metres. Possibly there is even an echo of this in "Tyger." If we are thinking of fearful symmetries there is surely a sense in which we can include the poem itself, with its tight rhyme scheme, precise wording, and arrangement of stanzas. Perhaps Blake is wondering at his own audacity as a creator, and if this is so the question "Did he who made the Lamb make thee?" is not such an innocent one. At all events, the need to construct an individual verse form in which the movements of the verse corresponded to the fluctuations of the visionary moment was clearly a powerful one for Blake. But one fraught with danger, because as T. S. Eliot remarks, the difficulty with the prophetic books is not that they are too visionary but that they are not visionary enough — rather than expressing a mythic view they are constructing one.⁷ As with Wordsworth, it is the attempt to make explicit what is really beyond that kind of explicitness which damages the experience it derives from.

It is, after all, the concern of the Romantics with what Wordsworth calls "unknown modes of being" (*Prelude*, I, 393) which haunts the reader of their poetry. If we feel the inadequacy of our interpretive procedures to explicate the full experience of their greatest poems, that is because the assumption of inadequacy is implicit in the poems themselves and is indeed part of their very argument. It is the sense we have of "Moving," in "worlds not realised" ("Immortality Ode," st. ix, l. 149), that ensures the potency of the verse. We can never "realise" completely Blake's "Tyger," it must always be beyond us, and that sense of some potentiality existing beyond us is what the poem is concerned with. The pressure to "realise" however, is always there and it provides one of the central tensions of Romantic poetry in the felt need of Romantics to find a linguistic notation for that which must essentially resist such notation. Behind Keats's ambition "of doing the world some good,"⁸ Wordsworth's stoical "philosophic mind," and Blake's "I must Create a System" (*Jerusalem*, Pl. x, l. 20) we can hear an intimation of the Victorian didacticism which was to triumph over the Romantic experience.

For the reader it is the awareness both of the extraordinary resonance of language and of its inherent limitations that remains. If, as Stanley Fish suggests, we see poems as events in time rather than spatial objects, then the nature of that resonance and limitation becomes clearer.⁹ For Fish the meaning of a text is not so much something embedded in it which we discover like a nugget of gold, but something which is enacted in us as we read: the process of reading is not the *vehicle* of meaning, it *is* the meaning. The text becomes inexhaustible not because there is always more in it but because there is always more in us who read it. To return to the hypothetical student, the sense he has of something existing beyond the words on the page, something indefinable but nonetheless potent may be because of the poem's ability to intimate the presence of those things in him. "The poem," Wallace Stevens says, "refreshes life so that we share, / For a moment, the first idea," it returns us, in other words, by its own singleness of being, to our own.¹⁰

NOTES

- ¹ "The Tables Turned," st. vii, l. 28. Quoted from *The Poetical Works of Wordsworth*, ed. T. Hutchison, rev. E. de Selincourt (London: O.U.P., 1950), p. 337. All subsequent references are to this edition.
- ² *Poetical Works*, ed. H. W. Garrod (London: O.U.P., 1956), p. 209. All subsequent references are to this edition.
- ³ *Moments of Being* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1976), p. 72.
- ⁴ "The Everlasting Gospel," l. 106. Quoted from *The Complete Writings of William Blake*, ed. G. Keynes (London: O.U.P., 1966), p. 753. All subsequent references are to this edition.
- ⁵ *Wordsworth and The Great System* (Cambridge: C.U.P., 1970), p. 95.
- ⁶ "Wordsworth's Moonlight-Poetry and the Sense of the 'Uncanny,'" *Ariel* (April 1982), vol. 13, no. 2, 19-31.
- ⁷ See "William Blake," *Selected Essays* (London: Faber, 1932), p. 321.
- ⁸ See Letter to R. Woodhouse, Tuesday, 27 October 1818, *The Letters of John Keats*, ed. M. B. Forman, 4th ed. (London: O.U.P., 1960), p. 227.
- ⁹ *Is There a Text in This Class?* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard Univ. Press, 1980), p. 25, et passim.
- ¹⁰ "Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction," st. 3, ll. 1-2. Quoted from *Selected Poems* (London: Faber, 1953), p. 101.