

## **Arrested Time in Wordsworth's Poetry and in Psychoanalysis**

**by Barbara Schapiro, Ph.D.**

One of the most salient features of the unconscious, according to Freud, is the absence of time. By that he is referring to the linearity of chronological time. In another sense, of course, the unconscious is suffused with time as the past haunts the present, particularly as repressed, traumatic experiences of the past impinge on and shape the present mind. Dominique Scarfone (2016) argues that it is the aim of psychoanalysis to come to terms with “arrested/repetitive time”—a time “of what cannot be represented” (p. 516). Through the enactments of the transference, the “traces of unspeakable experiences” that compose such arrested time can be “re-presented” and elaborated, worked through in the present, and ultimately rendered into an integrated and true past. A similar process can be found in the poetry of the English Romantic poet, William Wordsworth. His poetry also focuses on arrested, repetitive time, on experiences to which he refers as difficult to describe in language, experiences that contain terror and dread. Yet the poetry does confront and represent those experiences, and in so doing, it takes the reader through a healing process that, in its own way, mirrors a successful psychoanalytic treatment in which arrested, traumatic time is integrated into the flow of the past, providing hope for the future. Some of his poems, as we will see, indeed describe a process of mourning that reflects the stages of trauma recovery as described by Judith Herman (1992). Those stages include an immersion in arrested or frozen time that leads to a renewal of trust, compassion, and gratitude, and to a regeneration of self.

Wordsworth's mother died when he was eight years old, and that traumatic event was formative in the poet's life and art. The moments of arrested time in the poetry not only involve feelings of loss and abandonment, but dangerous, repressed feelings of overwhelming anxiety, rage and aggression. By giving form to those moments through the poetic imagination, Wordsworth describes a changing relationship with Nature that re-presents, re-enacts and repairs a maternal relationship that was arrested in time.

In *The Prelude* (1805/1970), an autobiographical verse narrative that Wordsworth subtitled the "Growth of a Poet's Mind," he writes:

There are in our existence spots of time,  
Which with distinct pre-eminence retain  
A vivifying Virtue, whence, . . .  
. . . our minds  
Are nourish'd and invisibly repair'd,  
. . .  
This efficacious spirit chiefly lurks  
Among those passages of life in which  
We have had deepest feeling that the mind  
Is lord and master, and that outward sense  
Is but obedient servant of her will.  
Such moments worthy of all gratitude,  
Are scatter'd everywhere, taking their date  
From our first childhood: in our childhood even  
Perhaps are most conspicuous. (p. 213)

Here Wordsworth is stressing the pleasurable, nourishing, and efficacious aspects of these "spots of time" or moments from childhood that impress him with the power of the human mind. In these moments, in other words, the power of internal mental experience dominates and holds sway over the "outward sense" of the external world. Wordsworth's spots of time indeed share much in common with Freud's notion of the "uncanny" (Freud, 1919/1959) in which the repressed fantasies of infancy are revived by some impression and reinforce the infantile belief in the omnipotence of thought. Freud stresses

the uneasiness, guilt, and threat usually associated with the uncanny, and so too do these qualities repeatedly emerge in Wordsworth's descriptions of the various spots of time in *The Prelude*. While Freud saw these feelings of threat and guilt as primarily Oedipal and arising from the forbidden impulses of the id, I would like to suggest a more relational interpretation that focuses on the dangerous ambivalence that inevitably arises out of the experience of separation and loss, particularly if it involves a child's traumatic loss of a parent. For the purposes of this paper, I would suggest that "spots of time" can be defined as heightened moments experienced in the external world that, due to unconscious associations, rekindle traumatic, frozen time in the poet's internal world. They are thus felt to be emotionally profound and ultimately revivifying.

In the first spot in *The Prelude*, the poet describes how once, as a boy, while riding in the hills, he became separated from his companion and accidentally stumbled upon a gibbet-mast "where in former times / A murderer had been hung in iron chains." The boy sees the murderer's name carved indelibly in the ground. Wordsworth continues,

. . . forthwith I left the spot  
 And, reascending the bare Common, saw  
 A naked Pool that lay beneath the hills,  
 The Beacon on the summit, and more near,  
 A Girl who bore a Pitcher on her head  
 And seem'd with difficult steps to force her way  
 Against the blowing wind. It was, in truth,  
 An ordinary sight; but I should need  
 Colours and words that are unknown to man  
 To paint the visionary dreariness  
 Which, while I look'd all round for my lost guide,  
 Did at that time invest the naked Pool,  
 The Beacon on the lonely Eminence,  
 The Woman, and her garments vex'd and toss'd  
 By the strong wind. (Wordsworth, 1805/1970, p. 214)

The spot begins with the anxiety of separation and an association with murder, and those elements invest the vision of the pool, the beacon and the girl with its uncanny power and meaning for the boy. Both the “naked Pool” and the “Girl who bore a Pitcher on her head” call forth maternal associations (with the pitcher perhaps a displaced breast symbol). The phallic “Beacon on the lonely Eminence” could also suggest an aggressive, looming male presence. The image of the girl “vex’d and toss’d” by the storm, forcing her way against the angry, blowing wind, may further reveal enraged and violent feelings surrounding the maternal figure. The predominant sense the scene conveys, at least to my reading of it, is one of profound dreariness and dread. Yet the poet relates how in later years, as he “roam’d about / In daily presence of this very scene, / Upon the naked pool and dreary crags, / And on the melancholy Beacon, fell / The spirit of pleasure and youth’s golden gleam” (Wordsworth, 1805/1970, p. 215). He speaks of the “radiance” and “power” these remembrances have left behind, and that radiance, power, and pleasure, I believe, arise from the creative imagination’s ability to give external form to the inner terrors associated with separation and traumatic loss, and particularly their attendant feelings of rage and aggression. Though the poet says he would “need / Colours and words that are unknown to man / To paint the visionary dreariness” of the scene, the very representation of those images speaks the unspeakable and gives expression to psychic dread. In the imagination’s externalization of what feels to be terrifying and unrepresentable lies its therapeutic and reparative function.

Water images, like the naked pool in the above spot, figure frequently in the spots of time and in Wordsworth’s poetry generally. The lakes, streams, seas, and waterfalls that enliven his landscapes are always the agents of either deep joy or profound terror and

destructiveness, and they invariably hold, or so it seems, clear maternal associations. Wordsworth refers frequently to the “bosom of the lake” or pool and to the “breast of open seas.” Water is invested with a distinct “power” and often with a loud, chastising, or threatening “voice.” In another spot the boy Wordsworth (1805/1970) witnesses the ghastly figure of a drowned man rising up out of a “calm Lake” which “Grew dark, with all the shadows on its breast” (p. 79). The water image can be a nourishing, receiving, and comforting presence while also the source of a terrifying vengeance for the boy/poet’s aggressive rage. It may also reflect the boy/poet’s deeply divided feelings towards the lost mother.

The spots of time often result in the boy feeling either exhilarated or profoundly disturbed as a result of his destructive feelings. In another spot the boy stealthily untethers a shepherd’s boat and takes it out on a moonlit lake: “from the Shore / I push’d, and struck the oars and struck again / In cadence” (p. 11). Nature retaliates, however, as a “huge Cliff / Rose up between me and the stars, and still, / With measur’d motion, like a living thing, / Strode after me” (Wordsworth, 1805/1970, p. 12). The boy returns the boat but describes how for days after, “in my thoughts / There was a darkness, call it solitude, / Or blank desertion,” a sense of “huge and mighty Forms” which “mov’d slowly through my mind / By day and were the trouble of my dreams” (p. 12). Whether the spot of time proves disturbing or exhilarating, however, it is an experience for which Wordsworth repeatedly expresses gratitude. These arrested moments of time from his childhood past, as they enact terrifying feelings and fantasies that he yet survives, ultimately seem to provide him with a deep and abiding sense of benevolence, both within Nature and himself.

This same process is described in one of Wordsworth's most well known poems, "Lines: Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey" (1798/1971). Like the spots of time, which are described as experienced "many a time" and are associated with repeated action, so "Tintern Abbey" begins with an emphasis on the passage of time and the repetition of past experience:

Five years have past; five summers, with the length  
Of five long winters! and again I hear  
These waters, rolling from their mountain-springs  
With a soft inland murmur. —Once again  
Do I behold these steep and lofty cliffs,  
That on a wild secluded scene impress  
Thoughts of more deep seclusion; and connect  
The landscape with the quiet of the sky. (Wordsworth, 1798/1971, p. 164)

The scene again reflects the familiar water imagery—here it is "soft and murmuring"—along with the potentially threatening "steep and lofty cliffs," similar to those that pursue the boy in the stolen boat spot of time. The description emphasizes isolation and "seclusion" and goes on to allude to a sense of abandonment as it refers to "vagrant dwellers in the houseless woods" and a "Hermit's cave, where by his fire / The Hermit sits alone." Yet the poem insists throughout that this natural setting, as well as the poet's ability to conjure it in his own imagination when separated from it, has been a source of healing for all of the loss, pain, and loneliness that time inevitably inflicts:

These beauteous forms,  
Through a long absence, have not been to me  
As is a landscape to a blind man's eye:  
But oft, in lonely rooms, and 'mid the din  
Of towns and cities, I have owed to them  
In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,  
Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart;  
And passing even into my purer mind,  
With tranquil restoration:—feelings too  
Of unremembered pleasure: such, perhaps,

As have no slight or trivial influence  
 On that best portion of a good man's life,  
 His little, nameless, unremembered, acts  
 Of kindness and of love. (Wordsworth, 1798/1971, p. 164)

Like *The Prelude*, "Tintern Abbey" can be seen as chronicling the growth of a poet's mind or psyche. That growth involves a confrontation with loss, terror and dread that results not only in "tranquil restoration," but in an enhanced moral sense of our connections with others. Critics have sometimes puzzled over how and why exactly the poet's experiences in nature should lead to moral goodness. A psychoanalytic perspective can shed some light on this question as we consider how the poetry can be seen as articulating an evolution of internal relations and unconscious fantasies surrounding the lost mother. "Tintern Abbey" continues to detail the poet's shifting relationship with Nature through time:

And so I dare to hope  
 Though changed, no doubt, from what I was when first  
 I came among these hills; when like a roe  
 I bounded o'er the mountains, by the sides  
 Of deep rivers, and the lonely streams,  
 Wherever nature led: more like a man  
 Flying from something that he dreads than one  
 Who sought the thing he loved. For nature then  
 (The coarser pleasures of my boyish days,  
 And their glad animal movements all gone by)  
 To me was all in all. —I cannot paint  
 What then I was. The sounding cataract  
 Haunted me like a passion: the tall rock,  
 The mountain, and the deep and gloomy wood,  
 Their colors and their forms, were then to me  
 An appetite; a feeling and a love,  
 . . . —That time is past,  
 And all its aching joys are now no more,  
 And all its dizzy raptures. (Wordsworth, 1798/1971, p. 164)

This passage describes a relationship with Nature that has changed from simple joy and “glad animal movements” to a “haunting” passion in which the poet felt he was “flying from something that he dreads.” The “tall rock” and “deep and gloomy wood,” again, seem to reflect a Nature that is as dangerous and menacing as it is joyful and rapturous. By giving expression to such frightening ambivalence in both Nature and the self, the poem presents a process of psychic growth in which it is possible for angry, destructive feelings towards the lost mother to be confronted and survived. This process then leads to an acceptance of loss and a newly awakened feeling of compassion for suffering humanity in general: “Not for this / Faint I, nor mourn nor murmur; other gifts / Have followed; for such loss, I would believe, / Abundant recompense. For I have learned / To look on nature, not as in the hour / Of thoughtless youth; but hearing often-times / The still, sad music of humanity, / Nor harsh nor grating, though of ample power / To chasten and subdue” (Wordsworth, 1798/1971, p. 164). The poet’s evolving relationship with nature leads him back to human connection and to moral responsibility.

“Tintern Abbey” concludes with Wordsworth’s direct address to his sister

Dorothy:

“Oh! yet a little while /  
 May I behold in thee what I was once, /  
 My dear, dear Sister! and this prayer I make, /  
 Knowing that Nature never did betray /  
 The heart that loved her” (1798/1971, p. 165).

The use of the negative construction here in asserting that Nature never did betray him suggests, of course, that he once did feel betrayed and abandoned. Now, however, the poet feels blessed, and he himself blesses Dorothy. Should she, like himself, ever encounter “solitude, or fear, or pain, or grief, . . . with what healing thoughts / Of tender

joy wilt thou remember me,” he exclaims, “And these my exhortations” (Wordsworth, 1798/1971, p. 165).

The process of mourning that “Tintern Abbey” records calls to mind Judith Herman’s (1992) description of the stages involved in trauma recovery. The first two stages involve giving narrative form to traumatic memory and investing it with feeling. This involves mourning the loss of basic trust and confronting despair (p. 193), which, Herman contends, “has a timeless quality that is frightening. The reconstruction of the trauma requires immersion in a past experience of frozen time” (p. 195). In the third and final stage, the trauma survivor “creates a new self, both ideally and in actuality” (p. 202). I am reminded here of the end of “Tintern Abbey” in which Wordsworth (1798/1971) sees in Dorothy the embodiment of his own past self. The third stage also involves a renewed capacity for trust, intimacy and connection, along with a sense of compassion for one’s self and others, and an emergent feeling of gratitude. Throughout his poetry, Wordsworth can be seen as taking the reader through these stages as he gives poetic form to experiences of frozen or arrested time. The imaginative confrontation with traumatic loss and its concomitant feelings of terror and dread leads to the renewed sense of trust, compassion, and gratitude that Herman identifies as emblematic of the final stage of trauma recovery.

Wordsworth’s poetry, finally, is deeply concerned with time—with the inevitable changes, losses and suffering that time inflicts on us all, as well as with the timelessness of the unconscious, as the poetry instructs us on how the past, particularly childhood experience, never ceases to affect and inform the adult’s mind and imagination. As Wordsworth courageously delves into the mystery, dread, and terror of arrested time, his

poetry engages the reader in a process akin to psychoanalytic therapy in which creative re-enactments, representations and elaborations exert a healing influence, potentially allowing one to find solace in the past and hope for the future.

#### References

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