New Conservative Explications

New Conservative Explications:
Reasoning with some Classic English Poems

By

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CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS
PUBLISHING

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This book first published 2011

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-4438-2715-0, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-2715-7

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book is dedicated to my wife and fellow scholar Rosalie. Besides generally being a blessing in my life, she, along with Marsha Kinder and now departed relatives and friends—Ruth Skolnik, Libby Sheklow, Morris Sheklow, Genee Fadiman, Bill Fadiman, and Beverle Houston—provided generous support or advice that forwarded the writing of the book. Jackie Elam, Karla Shippey, and publisher's anonymous reviewers also gave good advice. Ross Scimeca, Katherina Bell, and Brian Hartlet gave valuable library assistance, Edward Ipp gave valuable technical assistance, and Carol Koulikourdi, Amanda Millar, and Soucin Yip-Sou deftly shepherded the book through the publishing process. Manuel Schonhorn has provided enduring friendship, discussion, and collegiality. So too, while they lived, did L.S. Dembo, Bernard A. Block, and William D. Wolf. Hyman Kleinman and William York Tindall were inspiring teachers, and William H. Marshall was both inspiring teacher and friend. I regret only that this statement of my gratitude to all of them cannot be read by all of them.

Chapter 10 was originally published in a slightly different form as "Yeats's Fergus as a Sun God," *Éire-Ireland* 13.1 (1978): 76-86, © 1977 by the Irish American Cultural Institute.

PREFACE

Because of the triumph of postmodern studies, explication of classic poems by great dead white male English poets of preceding centuries has greatly declined in the last several decades, even though many of the poems may still be puzzling to interested readers, young and old. And because of their puzzlement, the curious young readers may be trying—and the persistent old ones may still be trying—to gain what they would consider a basic "understanding" of some of the poems. This book is addressed to both audiences in the hope that new explications of some classic English poems (or sections of these poems) of the last two centuries will encourage the former's curiosity about the poems and reinforce the latter's continued devotion to them.

Of course, in the present age, an explication cannot take the form of trumpeting a new and "correct" reading of a poem and so discarding all other readings as "incorrect." But a lesser attempt may still be helpful—a new reading that is only a basic explication rather than a full-blown interpretation, that results from reasoning with any seemingly relevant evidence from either inside or outside the poem, and that purports to be, not "correct," but only either *more* probable than an older explication or more-or-less *as* probable. Of the readings that follow, eight are offered as more probable, and three others—on poems by Wordsworth, Keats, and Browning—are offered as more-or-less as probable.

Although the explication procedure is now unpopular in theory and held to be as subjective as interpretation, the procedure is based on the experience that, if a puzzling poem is reasoned with, it can often be found to make sense on a basic level of understanding—a sense perhaps complex, ambiguous, or ambivalent but not self-contradictory. And in an attempt to show that the procedure can resist subjectivity, a new reading of Blake's "The Tyger" is offered but regretfully acknowledged to be *less* probable than an older explication.

In essence, then, this is a book of poetry explications having esthetic aims but written in an era of unesthetic political and cultural studies. Of course, my using the word *conservative* in the title of the book may seem

not only political but politically reactionary. However, *conservative* should be understood here as referring not to political but to explicatory conservatism as well as to critical and literary *conservation*—i.e., to conserving the practice of explication whether upon literary works old or new, and so also conserving esthetic interest in the old works themselves.

In this book the selected works are twelve classic Romantic, Victorian, and Modern English poems or sections of these poems. Although they were explicated in the past, they are still puzzling even on a basic level of understanding, and so here they are newly explicated. Two of them (Hardy's "Hap" and Yeats's "Who Goes With Fergus?") received fewer explications than they deserved because of critical interest in other poems by their authors; so too did two poem sections (the "Rome" stanzas of Shelley's *Adonais* and the "Prologue" to Tennyson's *In Memoriam*) because of critical interest in other sections. But other poems (Coleridge's "Frost at Midnight," Arnold's "Sohrab and Rustum," Yeats's "Easter 1916," and Auden's elegy on Yeats) did receive the amount of explication they deserved, to the point of diminishing returns. And still others (Blake's "The Tyger," Wordsworth's "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal," the last seven lines of Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn," and Browning's "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came") were explicated far past that point and became critical *causes célèbres*, so that one must be doubly reckless not only to explicate old classic poems but also to offer presumably new readings of them.[1] Nonetheless, I have taken the chance in the hope that, since all the readings here are conservative by current interpretive standards, conservativeness of explication will balance recklessness of choice. I have also taken the chance in the hope of showing that new conservative readings are still possible and can be still useful—even in the postmodern era and even on classic poems already much explicated—and that therefore explication still has much to do in the work of literary studies in the postmodern era. Let explication continue to do its work, and, if on some day in the distant future, it once again becomes a norm in literary criticism to explicate classic English poems, then-grown-old conservative readings of some of them may be found to be still useful.

* * * * *

At this point, four caveats are in order:

(1) Superficially, a relatively probable explication looks enough like a conventional explication to be, at first glance, mistaken for an exercise in the New Criticism. However, unlike that exercise, it can incorporate evidence from any source, not just the language of the text, and it exists here only in the comparison with one or more alternative explications instead of by itself as a "true" New Critical reading.

(2) Whereas the explication offered here of one particular poem may be compared with *many* alternative explications, the explication offered here of another poem may be compared with only one alternative explication. However, it should not be supposed that this variation is an unevenness in an attempted survey of known explications of the poem. I have attempted no such survey.

(3) I sometimes discuss in detail a crux on which I think the explication of a poem depends, but that does not mean that I intend to expand the explication into a full-scale interpretation of the poem. I have not attempted any such interpretations.

(4) In any chapter, if it becomes necessary to repeat more than once that one explication is more probable than another or more-or-less as probable as another, I substitute a less precise but shorter phrase indicating, respectively, preference (e.g., one explication *instead of* or *rather than* another) or lack of preference (e.g., *either* one explication *or* another). In this way, the monotony and wordiness that would result from repetition of the relative-probability statement can be avoided. Nonetheless, the reader should understand that by the shorter phrase I mean that statement.

CHAPTER ONE

THE CREATOR AS DIVINE SMITH: BLAKE'S "THE TYGER"

From the beginning of the poem two metaphors are in evidence. The Creator as a divine smith or blacksmith "frame[d]" the tiger[1]—i.e., gave it "form" (a manuscript reading) rather than created it out of nothing;[2] and He formed the eyes (and perhaps all) of the tiger out of the fire of stars. The Creator's smithy may therefore have been the starry heavens as well as the earth.

Although the metaphor of the Creator as blacksmith becomes explicit when hammer, chain, furnace, and anvil are named as devices used in the creation, the blacksmith metaphor may first be suspected in the images where the Creator's hand dares seize the fire (Adams, *Blake* 64) and frame the symmetry of the tiger and where His shoulder twists the sinews of its heart (John Grant 597-98). Similarly, although the metaphor of the tiger's eyes as stellar fire becomes explicit in the question "In what distant deeps or skies / Burnt the fire of thine eyes?"[3] the metaphor of the whole tiger as stellar fire may first be suspected in the image of the tiger "burning bright / In the forests of the night." Besides being envisioned as an animal whose eyes reflect light at night (or whose bright orange hide is flame-colored) and so may be described as "burning bright" in the nighttime forests, the tiger may be envisioned also as a creature of stars—not the same as the ancient mythological creatures who were the constellations, yet like them in being composed of stellar fire and thus "burning bright" in the *forest-like night* (for the night sky may be figuratively described as "forests" of interspersed light, darkness, and shadow).[4]

By mention of the hammer, chain, furnace, anvil, seizing hand, and twisting shoulder, the poem evokes several steps in the blacksmithing process. With one hand, using tongs, the blacksmith holds in the furnace the piece of metal to be forged. With the other hand he pumps the top, movable handle of the furnace bellows to make the fire hotter. A chain attaches that handle to the furnace wall, and another chain attaches the bottom, immovable handle to the floor (as illustrated in Plate 6 of

Jerusalem). When the piece of metal is as red- or white-hot as he needs, he twists, hammers, or otherwise works it into shape on the anvil.[5]

But a further step in the process is also relevant to the poem: the blacksmith then plunges the hot shaped metal into cold water to temper or merely cool it; and as the hot metal strikes the surface of the water, it sends a steamy shower of hot water droplets into the air (Watson 2, 50). The act of immersion here (rather than its result) is evoked in a rejected stanza written in Blake's notebook around 1792. The stanza continues the thought of the last two lines of the preceding third stanza:

> And when thy heart began to beat
> What dread hand & what dread feet
>
> Could fetch it from the furnace deep
> And in thy horrid ribs dare steep
> In the well of sanguine woe
> In what clay & in what mould
> Were thy eyes of fury rolld (N109)

The object of quenching the hot metal in a bath of water is accomplished, in lines 2-3 of the above stanza, by inserting the hot heart into the rib cage where it "steep[s]" in a "well" of ("sanguine") blood enclosed by the ribs.

In addition, the result of immersion (rather than the act) is perhaps evoked in the couplet of lines 17-18: "When the stars threw down their spears, / And water'd heaven with their tears." In a trial draft in Blake's notebook this couplet was only six lines away from the metaphor of the tiger's eyes as stellar fire and, when rearranged as directed by numbers in the notebook, was only three lines away:

> Burnt in distant deeps or skies
> The cruel fire of thine eyes
> Could heart descend or wings aspire
> What the hand dare sieze the fire
>
> 5 dare he ~~smile laugh~~
> 3 And ~~did he laugh~~ his work to see
>
> ~~ankle~~
> ~~What the shoulder what the knee~~
> Dare
> 4 ~~Did~~ he who made the lamb make thee
> 1 When the stars threw down their spears
> 2 And waterd heaven with their tears (N108)

Therefore, the relatedness of the stars in the couplet to eyes is more apparent in the notebook than in the published version where the couplet is eleven lines away. Besides, wherever placed in the poem, the couplet in itself relates the stars to eyes, for the stars "water'd heaven with their tears" (Deen 73).

As a consequence, the couplet may be read as referring to the final step in creating the tiger: inserting its eyes. Having "dare[d] sieze the fire" from the stars to make the eyes, the Divine Blacksmith then performed the immersion that tempered or cooled them by inserting them into the tiger's head (just as, in the rejected stanza, He had done for the heart by inserting it into the rib cage). Now quenched, the stars that formed the eyes ceased to be incandescent—to throw off or radiate rays of light like "spears"; and so it could be said that they "threw down their spears." (However, quenching the stellar fire of the eyes did not make them cold or dull, just as steeping the beating heart in a well of blood did not make it stop beating. Like the rest of the tiger, the eyes were still "burning bright," glowing with inner fire: they were still "eyes of fury.") Also upon immersion, the hot stars that formed the eyes sent a steamy shower of hot liquid droplets into the air, and so it could be said that these stars "water'd heaven with their tears."

Four other possible readings of the couplet seem simpler but less coherent and so less probable:

(1) The couplet announces the dawn, when the stars fade and the dew falls (Wicksteed 198; Pottle 39). If it is assumed that the Creator made the tiger at night (as well as that, in the poem, the tiger is envisioned at night), the question in line 19 then becomes, Did the Creator smile when the dawn came and He could "see" His finished work for the first time in the daylight? However, the reading is problematic because of the "dew": In Blake's time the stars were not thought to emit the dew and, with it, to water heaven as well as earth and its layer of air.[6]

(2) The couplet means that the "tiger grew on earth because the stars rained down their influences—threw down beams of light like 'spears,' and 'watered heaven' with those waters above the firmament that fertilise all growth in the elemental earth below" (Raine 49). But this reading too is problematic: If the beams of starlight were enough by themselves to make the tiger grow on earth, falling rainwater would not be additionally necessary to make it grow and so would not be necessary to mention in this context. Of course, Blake may merely have added the reference to the simultaneously falling waters gratuitously either to describe more fully the time of the creation of the tiger or to fill out the couplet with a second line and a rhyme; or else the reading here may be implying that the stars rain down their influences not directly upon the earth and its creatures but only

upon the "waters above the firmament," thus causing *them* to fall upon the earth and its creatures and make them grow. However, the first possibility questions Blake's prosodic ability, and the second causes the growth of the tiger improbably to be considered part of "all growth" that the waters "*fertilise . . . in*" the earth.

(3) Both lines of the couplet announce the same phenomenon (fiery heavenly bodies emitting light) but announce it in different terms: In one sense, the stars throw down spear-like rays of light; in another sense, the stars shower down light corpuscles ("Newton's Particles of light"—418), which are like teardrops (Stevenson 14). Or, in one sense, the stars throw down a shower of meteors and/or the meteors throw down spear-like rays of light; in another sense, the meteors are themselves tears figuratively: the Perseid showers of

> meteors were known as "the tears of St. Laurence," because they fell from heaven most abundantly on his feast day, 10 August. By tradition, St. Laurence was martyred on a gridiron and thus the falling stars were said to be his "fiery tears." (Olson and Olson 17)

If again it is assumed that the Creator made the tiger at night, the question in line 19 becomes, Did the Creator smile when He saw His finished work by starlight and meteorlight? However, since He created the tiger by starlight and meteorlight and at least its eyes *from* starlight or meteorlight, He would not have seen the tiger by better light *after* the creation than during it. Therefore, the couplet would be superfluous in the poem.

(4) The couplet announces the first occurrence of "lightning and thunderstorm—the actual, fulminatory beginning of the working universe" (Bier 42). In the alternate account of the Creation in Genesis 2, God makes rain (verse 6) before He makes the animals (verse 19). But why, then, should the couplet begin with "When" rather than "After," and why should the creation of the tiger be "timed" by that event (the first rainstorm) rather than by any of the other events that preceded the making of the animals?

A fifth possible reading seems less simple as well as, again, less coherent and so less probable: the stars are "assistants to the divine blacksmith" forging the tiger in a heavenly smithy, and the "spear-like rays of light from actual stars" are

> sparks showering down as the heavenly smiths strike hot metal with their hammers. After the shaping, they "watered heaven with their tears" to temper the still-glowing tiger-metal, yet in anguish over the thing they had helped create. (Eberly 12)

The question in line 19 then becomes, When (or although) the Creator's assistant smiths *wept* over the making of the tiger, did He (by contrast) "smile" over it? However, the reading is problematic. Did the smiths weep intentionally (to temper the metal) or unintentionally (because they could not contain their "anguish")? They could not have wept for both reasons. Moreover, in striking sparks from the hot metal with their hammers, the smiths would not have intentionally *thrown down* the sparks, for these would have flown off freely in all directions. At most, the smiths could be said to have *let fall* the sparks. But, if the Creator needed help from assistants in creating or if assistants themselves did the creating, then such creating could not suggest, as does "The Tyger," the inconceivably dread power of a Being that could and did create a life-form of such dread power as the tiger.[7]

Because these five less coherent readings of the couplet introduce all the above problems, the preceding reading of the couplet—the (inserting-the-) tiger's-eyes reading—seems preferable for the time being. Besides, it is similar to the reading of an easily understood passage from Blake's *The Book of Los* (1795), which describes the creation of the sun ("an Orb" like the eye).[8] Here the sun is made not by God and/or many assistants but by God's demiurge Los—the Creator as smith. As in "The Tyger" the forging process also begins with the fire and light of the stars—"the fierce fires / that glow'd furious in the expanse" and the "Light from the fires, / Beams" that, "conducted by fluid so pure, / Flow'd around the Immense."

> And first from those infinite fires,
> The light that flow'd down on the winds
> He siez'd, beating incessant, condensing
> The subtil particles in an Orb.
>
> Roaring indignant, the bright sparks
> Endur'd the vast Hammer; but unwearied
> Los beat on the Anvil, till glorious
> An immense Orb of fire he fram'd.
>
> Oft he quench'd it beneath in the Deeps,
> Then survey'd the all bright mass, Again
> Siezing fires from the terrific Orbs,
> He heated the round Globe, then beat,
> While, roaring, his Furnaces endur'd
> The chain'd Orb in their infinite wombs.
>
> Nine ages completed their circles
> When Los heated the glowing mass, casting
> It down into the Deeps: the Deeps fled

> Away in redounding smoke: the Sun
> Stood self-balanc'd. And Los smil'd with joy.
> (259-60 or Plate 5: lines 8-12, 27-45)

As in the forging of the tiger, the hand here also "siez'd" fire from the stars and "fram'd" it, using furnace, hammer, and anvil; and when the "chain'd Orb" of stellar fire was quenched in the Deeps, the water "fled away in redounding smoke" and the Orb remained "all bright." At the end of the process, Los appraised the finished sun with a smile.

On the other hand, the tiger being finished, the poet there rather asks about the Creator's appraisal of it: "Did he smile his work to see?" The smile may allude distantly to the Old Testament Creator's appraisal of *His* finished work: "And God saw that it was good."[9] But the question in "The Tyger" is not answered as in Genesis—with an affirmation of the goodness of the creation. Indeed, the question, like all the others in this poem of questions, is not answered at all, for they are all unanswerable, being questions about the metaphysical nature of the Creator and not about the nature of His created work. Moreover, the poet may not even be asking questions (rhetorical or otherwise) but rather wondering in the form of questions—wondering (up to line 16) what the dread power of a Being must be who makes a creature of such dread power as the tiger. As a result, in attempting to imagine the power of the tiger, the poet suggests that the power of its Creator is unimaginable.

But in the question of line 19, the poet is asking or wondering not about the Creator's metaphysical nature (His power) but about His ethical nature: did He—or even how *could* He—smile upon or approve of a "fearful," "horrid," "deadly," "cruel" beast "of fury" and "terror"? Also ethical is the following question of line 20 ("Did he who made the Lamb make thee?"), but the question is suggestively teleological as well: *how could He* but also *why did He* make the lamb and yet also make the tiger, which is its opposite or even its contradiction? This is really the last new question in the poem, since, to bring the poem full circle, the next and final question merely repeats the first question and so reverts to being about the Creator's metaphysical nature or dread power (the change of "could" to "dare" in the final question not being significant, since "dare" appears in the first question in the notebook version as well as throughout the poem in both notebook and published versions). Consequently, wonder about the Creator's ethics or purpose in making the tiger does not, at first glance, seem to be developed further.

To this point the above reading of the poem is inclusive and coherent—mainly because the couplet can be read as part of the smith imagery in the poem. Therefore, with the evidence introduced thus far, it might not seem necessary to try to speculate what the poet is wondering about the

Creator's ethics and purpose. In other words, it might not seem necessary to speculate whether, to the poet, the ethical natures of the lamb and tiger are respectively good and evil (or good and wrathfully righteous/ energetic), whether the creatures therefore represent respectively Christ and Satan (or Christ and Christ Militant), and whether both natures therefore belong to God, their Creator.[10] Indeed, to speculate in this way might make a reading of the poem that is less coherent. Evil and Satan (or wrathful righteousness/energy and Christ Militant) would have to be read into the nature of the tiger and its Creator as the latter two are evoked throughout the poem; and the belaboring of its parts to force such a reading might eliminate some meanings established above as well as the unity among established meanings but not produce a new unity—thus lessening coherence.

Nevertheless, four bodies of evidence not yet introduced necessitate such speculation. First, the Lamb in line 20 may be read as Christ because, just as other poems in *Songs of Experience* are counterparts of poems in *Songs of Innocence*, so may "The Tyger" be the counterpart of "The Lamb." There, as well as in "Night," the lamb is equated with Christ; and though lambs are not thus equated in "The Shepherd" or "The Little Black Boy," these poems mention lambs only in the plural and not in the singular.

Second, the stars in the couplet may be read as referring to Satan's armies or legions of fallen angels. In Night V of *Vala* (renamed The *Four Zoas*), Urizen, a figure like the rebellious Satan, describes the stars with the same image as in line 17 of "The Tyger": "I call'd the stars around my feet in the night of councils dark;/ The stars threw down their spears & fled naked away./ We fell" (311, lines 223-25). Admittedly, this passage was composed at some time from seven to ten years after the publication of "The Tyger,"[11] and, by then, the image may have developed additional associations not present in the earlier work. Nevertheless, even in 1791, reversing the Biblical convention of calling the stars "the host of heaven," Blake called the armies in *The French Revolution* "starry hosts" (138, line 100); and in 1793 he described in *America* defeated legions (though not stars) throwing down their spears and at least howling in anguish if not watering heaven with their tears: "The millions sent up a howl of anguish and threw off their hammer'd mail,/ And cast their swords & spears to earth, & stood a naked multitude" (202 or Plate 15, lines 4-5).

Third, two references possibly known to Blake in 1790 and after associate stars with weeping: Children call falling stars *angels' tears* (Erdman 196); and "Tom of Bedlam," an anonymous lyric reprinted in Joseph Ritson's *Ancient Songs* in 1790, contains the lines "I behold the stars / At mortal wars, / In the wounded welkin weeping."[12] In both

references the streams of light made by falling stars are probably being associated with streams of tears; and if Blake knew either reference, he might have associated it also with the weeping of Satan's angels falling from heaven.

Fourth, the image of the stars throwing down their spears and weeping can be and has been interpreted in another way: the stars do so not because, as Satan's angels, they have been defeated by God but because, prior to the fall, they are terrified either by the Satan-like Urizen's wrath against God or by its physical embodiment—the tiger that Urizen creates out of that wrath—and so they flee and weep with fear:

> the tiger was created by Urizen. The event took place at the very first Fiat of Creation, and was the result of Urizen's primal disobedience. Urizen, "first born of Generation" (*FZ* vii: 245), "heard the mild & holy voice saying, 'O light, spring up & shine' [Gen i: 3], & I sprang up from the deep. . . . [He] said, 'Go forth & guide my son [Albion] who wanders on the ocean.' I went not forth: I hid myself in black clouds of my wrath; I call'd the stars around my feet in the night of councils dark; the stars threw down their spears & fled naked away" (*FZ* v: 218-24).
>
> Thus Wrath came into being. It is Urizen's, not the benign Creator's. Urizen's satanic Pride was affronted when he was appointed to serve Man. That his Wrath was the creation of the Tyger is confirmed by the action of Urizen's stars, who fling down their spears in terror.[13]

Since, in Stanza 5, the tiger can be interpreted as the embodiment of satanic Urizen's wrath, the tiger can reasonably be equated with Satan and the lamb with Christ. But does this contravene the above explication of the first four stanzas? No, for the image of Urizen creating the tiger from his wrath is compatible with the smith imagery of those earlier stanzas. Like a blacksmith shaping red-hot metal or the demiurge Los "fram[ing]" the sun out of "particles" of stellar fire, Urizen may be thought of as "fram[ing]" the tiger out of his wrath. And though the creator of the tiger is Urizen rather than God, the poet can still be questioning or wondering (in all stanzas but the fifth) what the dread power of a being must be who makes a creature of such dread power as the tiger. As a result, in attempting to imagine the power of the tiger, the poet can still be suggesting that the power of its creator (Urizen) is unimaginable. Moreover, in attempting to imagine the intensity of cruelty, fury, and terror in the tiger and then asking whether its creator smiled upon it after it was created, the poet suggests that its creator is equal to or surpasses the tiger in cruelty, fury, and terror. Consequently, the answer to the question in line 20 must be "no," for God, not Urizen, made the lamb.

Because the above speculative explication of the couplet is different from the explication of it derived only from the smith imagery and yet is compatible with that imagery, the speculative explication seems more inclusive than the other while being equally coherent and so seems preferable. In other words, the couplet seems more probably about the terror-stricken angel-stars of the satanic Urizen than about the insertion of the tiger's eyes. Besides, the later reuse of line 17 in *Vala*, where it refers to Urizen's stars, is practically exact, and the above-mentioned closely associated images appear in other of Blake's works contemporary with "The Tyger." Conversely, since the couplet is about stars, it is not an exact statement about eyes despite the reference to tears. And even if considered about eyes, the couplet is not an exact statement about the *tiger's* eyes. Even if it were, it would still not be a statement about *thine* eyes (as in line 6) or *thy* "tears," for throughout the poem the tiger is addressed in the second person and not referred to in the third ("their tears"). Besides, would "eyes of fury," made of "cruel fire" and set in a "fearful," "horrid" beast of "deadly terrors," be capable of "tears"? The couplet is therefore at several removes of explication from the tiger's-eyes reading, and so that reading seems less probable than the terror-stricken-stars reading.[14] Regretfully, then, that part of the new reading presented here must be acknowledged to be less probable than an older reading.

CHAPTER TWO

THE NATURE OF LUCY'S "SLEEP": WORDSWORTH'S "A SLUMBER DID MY SPIRIT SEAL"

This chapter will try to show that, in Wordsworth's "Slumber," one of the two major viewpoints about the nature of the dead Lucy is more or less as probable as the other viewpoint.

Two questions have long been associated with the poem: whether it is, as a whole, ironic and whether, by dying, Lucy has become merely lifeless and inert matter or part of the living world of animate nature. The second question has been more widely discussed. After Cleanth Brooks espoused the inertness of the dead Lucy within the earth (236) and F.W. Bateson espoused her continuance within animate nature (33-34, 80-81), E.D. Hirsch, Jr., juxtaposed and contrasted their viewpoints as examples of opposite interpretations and at first judged in Bateson's favor ("Interpretation" 476-77); but subsequently he judged the choice between them to be indeterminable (*Validity* 181 and throughout). Since then, the question of the nature of the dead Lucy as well as of the meaning of the whole poem has been used as a test case by theorists to debate the nature of literary interpretation.[1] However, the poem will not be used here to continue this debate. Instead, the present chapter will try to show that either of the two viewpoints about the nature of the dead Lucy is more or less as probable as the other viewpoint but for a reason not mentioned by Hirsch—a reason dependent on an answer to the first question stated above, whether the poem is, as a whole, ironic. Consequently, the question about irony will be addressed first.

Cleanth Brooks also observed that Lucy's death in the second stanza is like the speaker's slumber in the first except that it is permanent.[2] Her death is like slumber because, when her death is first intimated at the beginning of the second stanza (the preceding two lines could have been referring merely to aging), the mentioned characteristics of her condition are those common to slumber also: she does not move, exert force, hear, or see, and she is "rolled round . . . with" the earth. This last characteristic

implies a motion even gentler (because unnoticeable to the living) than the gentlest cradle-rocking motion for the slumbering. And so this last characteristic can also suggest that she is literally asleep, lying above or upon the ground like the elements of earth—the rocks, stones, and trees—that accompany her. But, just as the intimation of death rather than slumber becomes surer with the mention of each additional characteristic in stanza 2, so does the intimation of death become reconfirmed with the mention of each additional element of earth in the last line. Rather than rolling round with the earth upon which she lies asleep, she rolls round with the earth in which she is buried and of which, with the other elements, she is a part.

Besides the second stanza describing death like the slumber in the first stanza, the first stanza can be said to describe the reciprocal condition—slumber that is like death in the second stanza. And it is important to note that this deathlike slumber in the first stanza does not logically follow merely from the slumberlike death in the second, for, even if slumber were described only literally in the first stanza, the slumberlike death in the second would still be true. No, the slumber in the first stanza is like the death in the second because of five elements in the first line of the poem. These elements suggest death figuratively and associate the speaker's slumber with death:

(1) A figurative meaning of the verb *to slumber* even without any surrounding context is "to lie at rest in death or the grave."[3]

(2) The word *spirit* carries with it a suggestion of death, whereas an alternative word that would also fit the context of the first line—a word like *senses* or *awareness*—would not suggest death. Even when spirit denotes the most alive of entities—the animating breath of life itself—it is distinguished from (and so suggests by association) the physical organism that is dead and inanimate without it (Def. I1, OED).

(3) The verb *seal* connotes a long-lasting, perhaps permanent "deadening" effect, whereas an alternative verb that would also fit the context of the first line—a verb like *dull* or *numb*—would not connote duration.[4] Another passage by Wordsworth—this one about an immobile horse—uses the same sense of the verb *seal* in a context of figurative death:

> With one leg from the ground the creature stood
> Insensible and still,—breath, motion gone,
> Hairs, colour, all but shape and substance gone,

> Mane, ears, and tail, as lifeless as the trunk
> That had no stir of breath; we paused awhile
> In pleasure of the sight, and left him there
> With all his functions silently sealed up,
> Like an amphibious work of Nature's hand,
> A Borderer dwelling betwixt life and death,
> A living Statue or a statued Life.[5]

(4) One of the ways in which Lucy's death is indicated in the second stanza is through her loss of hearing and sight: "She neither hears nor sees." But even in line 1 of the poem, the verb "seal" can carry with it the suggestion of a similar loss of hearing and sight in the speaker, for a figurative meaning of *seal* as in "*to seal* (a person's) *eyes* or *ears* [is] to render blind or deaf, also to restrain from looking or listening." Applied to the eyes alone, "this verb is not always distinguishable from the figurative use of SEEL" ("Seal," def. 6b, OED), for *seel* also is "to make blind, to prevent from seeing."[6] Thus, in the first stanza, slumber produces in the speaker a state of blindness and deafness like the dead Lucy's in the second stanza.

Another passage in which Wordsworth uses both "slumber" and "seal" implies not only night approaching like death ("the last lights die") but also hearing and sight being lost:

> On the . . . village Silence sets her seal
> And in the glimmering vale the last lights die
> The kine obscurely seen before me lie
> Round the dim horse that crops his later meal
> Scarce heard; a timely slumber seems to steal
> O'er vale and mountain; . . . ear and eye
> Alike are vacant. . . .[7]

(5) Some months after Wordsworth composed "Slumber," he sent it to Coleridge, who then copied it into a letter to their friend Thomas Poole and there entitled the poem "Epitaph." Any reader reading this title and then the first line would receive the mistaken impression that the poem is the speaker's epitaph and that his slumber is his death. Although the succeeding lines would unsettle this first impression and gradually show that it is Lucy who died, the figurative if not literal association of slumber with death would already have been permanently effected.

Of course, whether "Epitaph" was Wordsworth's original title can never be verified since the copy of the poem he sent to Coleridge has been

lost. Undermining the authenticity of the title is the fact that no edition overseen by Wordsworth used it. Moreover, before copying the poem for Poole, Coleridge wrote that "some months ago Wordsworth transmitted to me a most sublime Epitaph" (*Letters* 479). On his own authority Coleridge may then have added his last word to the poem as its title.

To his observation that Lucy's death is a permanent slumber, Cleanth Brooks added that "her unnatural slumber has waked him [the speaker] out of his." This shifting of slumbers and awakedness actually constitutes a second reciprocal condition (i.e., different from the one discussed above)—the intensely alive/awake Lucy goes to sleep permanently and, in response and reverse reciprocation, the sleeping speaker becomes intensely awake/alive. However, to Brooks, this shifting was not fully ironic: it had only "the makings . . . of a sort of ironical contrast between his slumber and hers," since "Wordsworth does not choose to exploit the contrast as such." And even what Brooks did admit to be an "ironical contrast" which Wordsworth "does stress"—a contrast between Lucy's apparent immunity in the first stanza to feeling "the touch of earthly years" and her actual immunity in the second stanza to such feeling (i.e., that she is aging)—did "not necessarily" make the poem ironic to Brooks. Indeed, he introduced the question of irony in the poem only "to account for my temptation to call such a poem ironical—not to insist that others call it so" (Brooks 236-37).

Sixteen years later, Geoffrey Hartman noted the same shifting of slumbers between stanzas: "the slumber is depicted as having passed, as it were, from the poet to the object of his thoughts." Hartman too accepted this shifting as ironic in tendency, but, like Brooks, he could not call the poem ironic: "the poem may have its structural irony, but the poem's mood is meditative beyond irony."[8] With a special deconstructionist view of irony in mind, Paul de Man and J. Hillis Miller also rejected the classification. For de Man the poem was not, "as a whole, ironic [because] the stance of the speaker, who exists in the 'now' is that of a subject whose insight is no longer in doubt and who is no longer vulnerable to irony" (206). For Miller "whatever track the reader follows through the poem he arrives at blank contradictions, [and] these contradictions are not ironic" (108).

But even if one accepts such restrictions on the classification of irony, it should be noted that none of these restrictive critics except Hartman observed the deathlike character of the speaker's slumber, and Hartman merely called the "poet-slumberer" a Sleeping Beauty figure.[9] Admittedly, one may not be able to accept as sufficient to make the poem ironic (1) the shifting of figurative *slumber* from the speaker in the first stanza to Lucy in the second, as well as (2) the shifting of literal *awakedness* from Lucy in

the first stanza to the speaker in the second. But if one observes, in addition, that (3) *death* shifts from being figurative in the speaker in the first stanza to being literal in Lucy in the second and that the second shifting is the *reciprocal* of both the first and the third shifting, then calling the whole poem ironic seems reasonable as long as irony here refers only to the irony of fate (or of situation or circumstance) and not to tragic (or dramatic) irony, deconstructionist irony, or any exclusively verbal irony. The irony of fate depends upon unexpected reversal,[10] and the poem is pervaded not only by such reversal but by reciprocal reversal, which is even more unexpected and so intensifies the irony of fate.[11] Literary examples of irony of fate had been available to any writer who had ever read or seen a play by Sophocles; but, in addition, around the beginning of the nineteenth century, such examples began to be noted and identified by the term *irony*.[12] Therefore, Wordsworth's knowledge of irony of fate and his use of it in a poem are plausible.

The above reciprocal reversals bear upon the second problem in the poem, the nature of the dead Lucy. An intensely alive/awake Lucy going to sleep permanently and her death being like slumber (an animate state) suggest by association that her death is trancelike or still vital—that she is "alive" in some biological or metaphysical sense, buried in and organically part of the living world of animate nature. Although Bateson and many other critics have thought this the nature of the dead Lucy, they have cited as evidence not any slumberlike qualities in Lucy's death but the majesty of the last two lines of the poem or the living trees at its end or the optimistic pantheism in other poems by Wordsworth.[13] Indeed, the views of critics, whether of the dead Lucy as merely lifeless and inert matter or as part of the living world of animate nature, are views merely of the second stanza. They are therefore partial views, comprehending only half the poem as the means to interpret the whole poem and directing critical attention to the second stanza alone rather than to the *irony between* stanzas.

If the relationship between stanzas is ironic because of unexpected reciprocal reversals (between deathlike slumber and slumberlike death as well as between the permanent falling asleep of Lucy and the awakening of the speaker), the relationship is additionally ironic because of contrasts other than the reversals—contrasts not only between the speaker's past illusion and the present reality but also between his present feelings about his past illusion and his present feelings about the present reality. In the first stanza he muses over the past illusion, at first musing over his lapse of foresight and then over Lucy's nature which was such as could make understandable that lapse in him. Although the first two lines might conceivably be read with bitterness, the last two lines evince a tone of

wistfulness and so control the tone of the whole stanza to (at worst) a level of bittersweetness. By contrast, in the second stanza, as if forgetting himself completely, the speaker describes the present reality of Lucy. Once again, the first two lines might conceivably be read with bitterness—or hopelessness; but then the tone would clash with the tone in the last two lines—either with the pensiveness needed to convey the grim strangeness in such a conception of her state of death (if he thought her lifeless and inert within the earth) or else with the partial comfort needed to convey belief in her somewhat still vital state (if he thought her a living part of animate nature). As a whole, then, the second stanza should be read with as little trace of emotion as possible—as if the speaker were only just recovering enough from exhaustion of emotion to reflect upon her death. He passes from wistful or bittersweet, musing remembrance not only to vivid awareness of her present state but also to subdued wonder at the ironic difference between then and now.

Since the first stanza emphasizes the past and the second stanza the ironic contrasts between the present and the past, the ironic effect would be more intense as the contrasts are more extreme; and since Lucy was intensely alive/awake in the past, a present state of complete lifelessness within the earth would be more extreme a contrast with the past than would a present state of mystical life within animate nature. Consequently, the irony produced by the contrasts discussed in the previous paragraph would favor the view that Lucy is utterly dead rather than mystically alive in nature. Unfortunately, this view is contrary to the one that the reciprocal reversals suggest by association. The reason for this contrariety may be that the ironic contrasts are literal whereas the irony of the reversals depends on their figurativeness—the speaker's unawareness being like slumber, his slumber being like death, and Lucy's death being like slumber. If slumber in the first stanza and death in the second had not been presented figuratively, no reversals and thus no irony from them would have resulted. Therefore, the question about Lucy's state in death may seem to depend on a single consideration: (1) whether the irony of the figurative reciprocal reversals or the irony of the literal contrasts is more important. However, other considerations are also relevant to the question. Two of them result from the above discussion:

(2) whether the figurative reversals, in *suggesting by association* a pantheistic view of Lucy, automatically become evidence of a *literal* pantheistic view of her—of Lucy not just figuratively but literally alive (though permanently asleep) within animate nature
(3) whether Wordsworth did actually intend the ironic effect of the contrasts to be as extreme as possible.

Other considerations are those alternative subordinate readings (of details in the poem) that support one or the other view of Lucy's state in death:

(4) whether "thing" in line 3 is to be understood in a subhuman sense to presage a later inanimate state or understood in a superhuman sense to presage a later mystically alive state or understood in one of these senses to contrast with the later opposite state or, innocent of all such intentions, is to be understood in none of these ways

(5) whether Lucy's seeming immunity from feeling "the touch of earthly years" while alive is then *belied* by her feeling that touch and so dying utterly or is then *made actual* by her becoming immune, in a protective death, from feeling that touch

(6) whether her motion in line 7 relates to her motionlessness in line 5 as an irony or a contrast (an external replacing an internal motive force) or, innocent of either intention, as an accidental and superficial contradiction

(7) whether, in line 8, trees are *like* rocks and stones in being earth elements associating her with inertness in the earth or are in *contrast* with rocks and stones in being organic and alive and thus associating her with a mystical life in nature.[14]

However, in each of these seven considerations, one alternative cannot be judged to be more probable than the other or others; and because of this circumstance, the view that, by dying, Lucy has become merely lifeless and inert matter is more or less as probable as the view that she has become part of the living world of animate nature.