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Surrender Dorothy: A Reply to Leona Toker*

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Bewitching as the hermeneutics of suspicion has been, it's unusual to see a literary critic resist its (highly marketable) charms and instead trust her ears, eyes, hands—her *feel* for the texture of nuance—and more generally her good will toward poetry. Such a critic is Leona Toker. Her piece on "Tintern Abbey" testifies to all these nearly forgotten capacities. Variously indebted to neo-Marxist thought, especially as it has been reproduced in the new historicism and cultural materialism, many recent critics have ransomed good sense, sympathy, and acuity for a set of initiatives that turn poems into either political documents or—what is worse—evasions from politics altogether. Wordsworth in particular has received the jackal's share of negative hermeneutics, for his poems, from a certain alienated perspective, seem to demonstrate Walter Benjamin's thesis that "Every document of civilization is at the same time a document of barbarism." The allure of this formulation has beguiled a generation of literary critics and underwritten some of the most pretentious, wrongheaded and, to my mind, dishonest work, much of it published by first-rate journals and university presses.

An analogy and a paradox, perhaps a paradoxical analogy, governs this suspicion toward Wordsworth and "Tintern Abbey." Just as Wordsworth is represented as being a politically disengaged, condescending, authoritative, in a word, an *unsympathetic* presence in the poem, so critics turn on him and take their cue from him at the same time. Wordsworth, that is, reads history against the grain by ignoring the meaning of his own subtitle (the presumably portentous July 13, 1798) and climbing above

*Reference: Leona Toker, " Wordsworth's 'Tintern Abbey': From Self-Consciousness to Sympathy," *Connotations* 7.2 (1997/98): 181-93.

and beyond the ruined abbey (presumably full of vagrants, "the homeless") into the abbey of his mind, his redemptive memory and " that serene and blessed mood" that may allow all of us to "see into the life of things." Wordsworth's lack of sympathy toward politics, vagrants and, most alarming of all, his sister Dorothy (reposing with him under the dark sycamore) has become a foregone conclusion among critics eager themselves to show off their lack of sympathy toward their subject. Have these critics learned from Wordsworth how to be unsympathetic readers? If so, this would be a paradox indeed, since Wordsworth devoted his life and poetry to indicating how "affections gently lead us on" and encourage us, finally, to love our fellow human beings, as he certainly loved his sister.

Immensely to her credit, Toker does not fall prey to the enchantments that have made otherwise perceptive critics deaf to anything but the siren-call of their alarming suspicions about Wordsworth's "exploitation" of Dorothy in "Tintern Abbey." Toker follows earlier critics (Abrams, Hartman, the early Bloom) when she sees the address to Dorothy as "a respectful and sympathetic turning to a fellow subject" (188). The difference between Toker and her new historical counterparts (John Barrell and Marjorie Levinson chief among them) rests with her patience in reading the nuances of words and lines and in not assuming from the beginning that something unseemly, egoistical, and alienated pervades Wordsworth's poem. Toker does not interrogate Wordsworth's distances, for indeed he can be distant (even from himself, as in "Tintern Abbey"), but rather incorporates his strange fits of detachment into a more comprehensive understanding of the honest perplexity generating his best poetry. "Tintern Abbey" is a meditation whose every affirmation is parsed by doubt, a set of wistful affirmations struggling to affirm the loss of childhood wonder that the poet glancingly recaptures in the wild delight of his sister's eyes. Taking into account the paradoxes and tensions in "Tintern Abbey," Toker nevertheless does not make them her own modus operandi, or what could be described as hobbihorsicality, the ruling passion of critics who insist on finding (contrary to Oscar Wilde's strictures) ugly meanings in beautiful things.

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