The Synthesis of the Narrative and the Typological: 

Luco and the Female Vagrant

(2500 words)

The season in literary history retrospectively identified as the Romantic period witnessed a change in biblical hermeneutic modes in British Protestant culture\(^1\), corresponding approximately with a particular change in European historical perspectives concerning the role of humanity in history. This essay will examine how the cultural dynamic of these developments may inform the interpretation of two pieces of Romantic poetry: Ann Yearsley’s ‘A Poem on the Inhumanity of the Slave-Trade’ (1788) and William Wordsworth’s ‘The Female Vagrant’ from *Lyrical Ballads* (1798).

Pre-eighteenth century typological readers sought to decrypt the significance of events in the Old Testament by interpreting them as anticipatory of Christ’s life\(^2\), thereby determining whether they allegorically gestured toward the New Testament or the Church, had tropological implications for the individual soul, or bore anagogical clues to the end of history\(^3\).

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\(^1\) Prickett 1996, 155
\(^2\) Scholes et al 2006, 122
\(^3\) Baldick 2004, 266
By the end of the eighteenth century, "even devotional readers were looking at biblical stories in terms of plot, character, or motivation," tending to regard the Bible less as its own self-contained finite multitude of relational truths, and more as a series of "univocal, linear and successive scenes from a play or chapters of a novel." With the seventeenth-century Calvinistic emphasis on the "denial of human freedom since the Fall," God's operation was understood to be the agent of predestination. The element of mystery as the divine plan unfurled was temporal in the present moment – ultimately, everything was teleologically explicable. Edmund Burke's "casting" of Providence on the "stage of history" in 1795 in his description of events during the French Revolution, however, might be taken as representative of the idea of an intervening will setting events in motion as it advanced mysteriously forward. Providence was the supreme storyteller – everyone was subject to an overarching subjectivity. The feeling of hurtling toward an inexorable denouement, implicitly prefigured in the narrative unity of drama, was tempered with a heightened sense of contingency about the nature of the end of history.

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4 Ed. Jasper and Prickett 1999, 6
5 Prickett 1996, 156
6 Blackburn 2005, 51
7 Prickett 1996, 157
8 Ibid.
Thus the notion of Providence as the prime orchestrator vivified the potency of the individual will in influencing the course of history, and encouraged an "heroic" view of history as the product of forceful personalities⁹. Participants in history, rather than irresistibly living out teleologically determined machinations, were empowered with the capacity to influence the workings of the human plot.

This compelling synthesis of the Calvinistic idea of humanity’s ineluctable fate, inherently portended by historical events, and that of living in the experience of human volition as the primum mobile in shaping a narrative historical course, is evident in our chosen poetry. The eighteenth-century concept of sensibility¹⁰ figures significantly in both poems. Compassionate insight into the emotional and psychological situation of another enables a conceptual and emotional grasp of personages and predicaments otherwise beyond the scope of the poet’s sympathies, and serves as a platform for developments of narrative and typological significance.

Yearsley attributes a spiritual being to her Indian characters. They are sympathetically portrayed as possessing an inarticulate self-consciousness. Incilanda is described as not knowing ‘aught/Of language strong enough to paint her soul,/Or ease the great emotion’ (154-156) of her longing for Luco. His father lacks the idiom of any

⁹ Baldick 2004, 224
¹⁰ Ibid., 233
‘forced philosophy’ to indite precisely and acquire any logical grasp over the ‘wild’ churnings of his ‘wounded nature’ prompted by the removal of his son, hence he cannot master the internal ‘anarchy’ and ‘calm his soul’ (171-173). Words are unavailable to Luco and offer ‘no relief’ to his ‘silent woe’ as a slave (252). Notably, Luco’s eyes are ‘silent, not inexpressive’ (59). Despite his ineloquence, the phrase implies a voice stifled rather than fundamentally absent. The ‘strong beams’ (59) of his gaze, neither glazed nor inert, suggest a ruminative awareness of his experiences. Yearsley’s characters virtually struggle to express their grievances, hence she affords two means of articulation which delineate their spiritual being.

The first pertains to Luco’s position as the emotional focus of Yearsley’s poem. As the representative figure bringing us through the heinous treatment of slaves, it would have been fundamentally remarkable to those who thought slaves inferior that the slave has a story, a narrative of abuse and spiritual effacement which deserves to be told. Sensitivity for inferiority is demonstrated in Yearsley’s imaginative conception of a slave’s private existence beyond imperial utilitarian perceptions of slaves in the eighteenth century, which tended to be restricted to the physical products of their employment, hardly extending past the sugar and tobacco11. What the slave lacks in

language for an acutely rationalised self-consciousness, the poet generously provides. The riot of internal nuance she attributes to the Indian characters demonstrates their ability to feel as keenly and subtly as the poet: Incilanda’s ‘mingled cares’ (159) and her struggles with ‘[i]ntruding memory’ (162); Luco’s ‘inward storm’ (251) as his ‘fruitless imagination’ is set in ‘wildest motion’ (248-249).

The second pertains to how the course of Luco’s tragic story is tracked by the secondary narrative of his eye. An organ of outward sight is associated with inward vision: the ‘strong beams’ of Luco’s eyes are absorbed in an interior memorial ‘view/Of his too-humble home’ (59-61). Luco hardly speaks in the poem, but his eyes exude an eloquent pensiveness, and through them we engage his wistful reminiscences of his ‘mourning father and his Incilanda’ (62). Thence the eye becomes an evocation of a spiritual communion through memory between the two lovers, transcending their physical separation. An unspoken but sustained commingling and negotiation between souls is suggested as ‘the virgin’s eye’ (135) is greeted by Luco’s hunting tools, and as she recalls ‘her eye/[Pursuing] the gen’rous Luco to the field’ (156-157). The gravid gaze of each appeals across the distance to the other, and is imbued further with the expressiveness of emotional articulation.
When Luco’s cheek is struck with ‘a too-heavy whip that reached his eye,/Making it dark for ever’ (256-257), the loss of sight is symbolically resonant with a complete extinguishing of any ‘beam’ of hope in Luco’s soul. Because his eyes have communicated his agonising emotional range, he is virtually struck dumb with blindness and spiritually muted. The culmination of the story of his gaze is a miserable one, as he is hung from a tree and subjected fatally to a growing flame: for no longer are they called ‘eyes’, merely ‘scorched balls’ (287).

In setting up a narrative of the soul, sensibility provides the necessary foregrounding for typological images, which contribute to the political imperative driving Yearsley’s poem. While Luco’s physical frame expires, the memory of Incilanda persists in his soul, two physically transcendent vitalities intermingling and sustaining each other ‘[t]ill both escape together’ (297). While Luco might have been driven ‘from the sacred font’ (313) and denied the opportunity of embracing God, the poet confers upon him the hope of a Christian salvation through sheer force of storytelling. Luco’s poetical deliverance from the eternal damnation of the faithless is a figurative demonstration of the poet’s faith in the imaginative will. The poet wields the force of overarching subjectivity in this narrative sphere, and in her position to dictate its dramatic course, she moulds and
wills a spiritual fate which she deems proportionate to Luco’s earthly suffering. Sensibility’s gift of a soul enables the slave to endure and transcend the slave-owner’s afflictions, thus triumphing over his worldly afflictions. The inherent tragedy in this attempt at spiritual salvation lies in its enactment in the idealistic (not empirical) realm. Thus melancholic tension arises from the implicit disjunction between the optimistic but ultimately impotent poetic immortalising of the unbaptised slave, and his envisaged actual, eternal falling away, accentuating the poet’s rebuke to the slave-owner for effectively casting Luco’s soul, a ‘blind, involuntary victim’ (307), into hell.

The image of Jesus Christ’s crucifixion on ‘Calv’ry’s mount’ (331) follows that of Luco being ‘chained/To a huge tree’ (273-274) and overwhelmed by fire. Their tortuous deaths become imaginably conflated and mutually evocative, and the poet’s anxiety for humanity and indignation against false ‘followers of Jesus’ (284) are heightened because of the typological significance of the event from the gospel of John. Both are precipitated by the manifest sinfulness of man: Luco’s death the culmination of atrocities against him, emblematic of the maltreatment of slaves in his position; the sacrifice of God’s only son intended to yield spiritual mediation by which man might seek redemption from his state of utter iniquity. However, whilst the latter makes divine grace and the possibility of salvation available to all, the
former is a pessimistically shameful episode which seems to exclude all potential for forgiveness. The very notion of absolution seems emotionally remote, for in place of penitence we observe only the sadism of ‘Christians’ who ‘throng each other to behold/The different alterations of [Luco’s] face/As the hot death approaches’ (281-283) – an image which reinforces the mutual allusiveness of both episodes with its echo of John 19:37, which describes the soldiers who ‘look on [Jesus] whom they pierced’.

The sacrifice of Christ foreshadows what Yearsley calls the ‘long eternity’ (335) wherein man will have surmounted worldly imperfections to reunite with God. Allowed to receive ‘knowledge of the Deity’ (310), the suffering of the slave would acquire the purposiveness of preparatory sanctification for heaven, which ‘hope in Jesus’ (314) would bring. Luco’s death, however, does not anticipate spiritual amelioration, and is emphatic of man being steeped in his fallen state, all the more hopelessly as those who profess to ‘avow a God’ (285) do not behave appropriately. The great plot of man’s spiritual restoration is stymied and circumscribed by his own wickedness. Thus there is an ironic inversion of the tropological figure of the one ‘who died to save’ (332). The hopeful signifier of the refinement of humanity’s soul is invoked to make a statement of the spiritual staleness of ‘Albion’s sons’ (206). They persist in cruelty
which causes Luco’s death, a trivial sacrifice in the machinations of the slave trade, which, unlike Christ’s, is spiritually vacuous, signifies nothing redemptive and affords no means for spiritual elevation.

Wordsworth’s poem marks significant points in the woman’s spiritual divergence with biblically suggestive images. The woman recalls her regard for her father as her ‘active sire’, with his ‘staff’ and ‘seat beneath the honeyed sycamore’ (28-30). This patriarchal kingliness alludes allegorically to providential watchfulness, God as Father ensuring continuity of her untroubled existence. With the capitalist incursion, her father – king of ‘his old hereditary nook’ (44) – is dethroned. Correspondingly, the situation of God in her life is usurped: with her subsequent inability to pray, we see attending her physical displacement the beginnings of a spiritual dislocation from which she never recovers.

Her journey with her husband to America, as he prepares to fight for the British in the War of Independence, isinauspicious. Nature seems prompted to revolt against the sanguinary perversity of war. The implication of a divine punitive response to the imminent violence comes with the onslaught of the whirlwind, which recalls Hosca 8:7, where the Israelites, facing impending judgement, are said to ‘have sown the wind, and they shall reap the whirlwind’.
When the woman returns to the sea on a British ship, her physical immovability on a ‘silent sea’ which ‘the wind[…]hardly curled’ (167-168) is a reflection of her spiritual stagnancy. This instantiates Wordsworth’s appropriation of the idea of nature ‘as a responsive mirror of the soul’ from German transcendental philosophy\(^\text{12}\) – indeed the ‘moor’ (265) to which she is ultimately forsaken is a bleak metaphor for the spiritual wilderness she withdraws into. As with Samuel Coleridge’s Ancient Mariner, who finds himself stranded on a ‘rotting sea’\(^\text{13}\) after killing the albatross, the woman’s physical situation appears the result of a fundamental human transgression – here, the internecine violence of war – so severe as to possibly alienate God and incur His abandonment.

The image of the ‘illimitable waters round’ (175) evokes the biblical deluge in Genesis brought to purge the world of wickedness, a ‘flood of waters’ to ‘destroy all flesh’ (6:17) in a world ‘corrupt’ and ‘filled with violence’ (6:11,12). We observe another tropical inversion. While God makes a covenant with Noah securing his immunity from the storm, Noah having ‘found grace in the eyes of the Lord’ (6:8), the female vagrant is not protected but marooned, not ‘remembered’ (8:1) but seemingly overlooked in her desolation. The ark shields Noah from the water; the vagrant finds the ship a virtual sepulchre, the

\(^{12}\) Baldrick 2004, 223
\(^{13}\) Coleridge in ed. Wu 2007: 701 (240)
‘ocean flood’ her ‘ready tomb’ (177). She does not survive because of God’s mercy, but is stranded as a representative member of humanity ejected from her spiritual anchorage by ‘the injustices of a social system which oppresses the poor and turns them into outcasts’14, and helplessly driven to stray from divine glory, as exemplified by ‘constant truth/And clear and open soul’ (260-261), by revolutionary upheaval. She is another ‘involuntary victim’15 of socio-political machinations made to shoulder the penalty of divine renunciation, it seems, for those complicit in these events.

Humanity is made participatory in Luso’s story with the extension of the ocular image: the poet implores ‘social love’ (355) to cure the blindness of the ‘ravished eye’ (401) of ‘drowsy man’ (394) so that he may dispense with ‘avarice’ (398) and act with ‘heartfelt sympathy’ (422). The poem ends with an annunciation of almost prophetic tenor – ‘Such is Bristol’s soul’ (425) – gesturing at Christ’s pronouncement – ‘It is finished’ (John 19:30) – with the fulfilment of the prophecy of His Crucifixion. The poet’s vision of ‘Bristol’s soul’ re-forged to ‘high perfection’ (424) inherits the force of inexorability from this allusion, expressing her conviction in liberating participants in the slave trade from the ‘fetters’ (397) of moral bigotry.

14 Brett and Jones in Wordsworth and Coleridge 1996: 280
15 Ibid
At the conclusion of the 'The Female Vagrant', the poet becomes the woman's substitute for a recipient of her confession and repentance of sin, accentuating the sense of her ostracism from God. It seems curious why the poet-listener does not respond to her plea for an 'earthly friend' (266). His peculiar unresponsiveness may be an attempt at a rhetorical implication of an apathetic reader. Thus the righteous impulse prompted in a reader against the listener's apparent indifference toward saving this spiritual stray is made to recoil on itself and provoke introspection on whether one has been complicit in the plight of characters such as the female vagrant, whether by heedlessness or abetment.

The interaction between narrative and typological elements in both poems emphasises human accountability, with typological references buoying their narrative incisiveness. The poetical narratives invite readers to participate imaginatively in the tribulations of their characters. That they are emotionally involving is equally a call to action, an appeal to human capacities for change.
Bibliography


