

Poetic destinies and destinations.

DEIRDRE COLEMAN

This paper surveys some of the anxieties poets felt in the mid eighteenth-century about the future of poetry in Britain, anxieties which had a formative influence on the 1790s generation of young romantic poets: was poetry in terminal decline, and if so, what part of the world would serve as poetry's new destination? Thomas Gray's poem, *The Bard. A Pindaric Ode* (1757) is a case in point. This poem was inspired by the story of King Edward I's massacre of the rebellious Welsh Bards, slaughtered, according to one account, because of their ability to incite the people to sedition.¹ Standing "On a rock, whose haughty brow/ Frowns o'er old Conway's foaming flood" the last of the Bards "with a master's hand and prophet's fire,/ Struck the deep sorrows of his lyre" (Lonsdale 185-6). Joining his voice to the "grisly band" of his dead fellow-bards, Gray's freedom-fighting Bard prophesies doom to the victorious Edward, then hurls himself into the abyss below—an end preferable to that of living under the yoke of foreign domination.

Gray found it very difficult to finish *The Bard* because he remained unconvinced of the truth of the Bard's prophecy, that the noble ardour of poetic genius would in the end always triumph over tyranny and oppression. This uncertainty, combined with doubts about the line of poetic authority, legitimacy and inheritance stretching from Spenser to Addison, halted progress for almost two years: Gray's writer's block was eventually relieved by an encounter with a blind Welsh harpist who inspired him with his collection of ancient Welsh songs (Lonsdale 178-9). Gray's doubts about the vigour and strength of English poetry never went away, however, re-appearing in his other Pindaric Ode of this time, *The Progress of Poesy* (1757). As Roger Lonsdale points out in his notes, it was commonly believed in the eighteenth century that, because liberty had declined in the former great cultural centres of the world—Greece, Rome, medieval Italy—the arts of poetry,

painting, and sculpture had migrated to Britain, home of true liberty. But the troubled ending to Gray's ode undermines confidence in this happy model of "progress". After summoning up the images of various greats (Shakespeare as the "immortal boy" nurtured by mighty Mother Earth, Milton riding sublimely satanic upon "the seraph-wings of Ecstasy", and Dryden in his "less presumptuous car"), Gray is obliged to ask:

Oh! lyre divine, what daring spirit
Wakes thee now? Though he inherit
Nor the pride nor ample pinion,
That the Theban eagle bear
Sailing with supreme dominion
Through the azure deep of air:
Yet oft before his infant eyes would run
Such forms as glitter in the Muse's ray ... (Lonsdale 176-7)

From the immortal boy Shakespeare to the sublime Milton, we are returned to nothing more than a gleam in the eye, to the "infant eyes" of the poet speaking in the present, a movement governed by a question which answers itself initially in negatives ("Nor the pride nor ample pinion"). Here, in Gray's great temporal sweep over the past out of which present poetry is to arise, we can locate a new sense of inferiority, an uncertainty that the present can in any way live up to the past. The mid-century's doubts are best seen in the ode's memorable stanzas on primitive poetry, a hodge-podge of "Erse, Norwegian, and Welch Fragments, the Lapland and American songs", Gray adds in a footnote (Lonsdale 168). Here poetic Genius and the spirit of liberty are seen to reside amongst the remotest and most uncivilized nations:

In climes beyond the solar road,
Where shaggy forms o'er ice-built mountains roam,
The Muse has broke the twilight-gloom
To cheer the shivering native's dull abode.
And oft, beneath the odorous shade
Of Chile's boundless forests laid,
She deigns to hear the savage youth repeat
In loose numbers wildly sweet

Their feather-cinctured chiefs and dusky loves.
Her track, where'er the goddess roves,
Glory pursue and generous Shame,
The unconquerable Mind and Freedom's holy flame.

(Lonsdale, 170-1)²

Gray's celebration of primitive poetry stemmed from the growing conviction that, whilst poetry may have attained the very heights of polite civility and decorum, it was nevertheless wanting in a certain fire and passion. In Hugh Blair's *Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian* (1763), a link is established between barbarity and the "highest beauties of poetical writing":

Irregular and unpolished we may expect the productions of uncultivated ages to be; but abounding, at the same time, with that enthusiasm, that vehemence and fire, which are the soul of poetry. For many circumstances of those times which we call barbarous, are favourable to the poetical spirit. That state, in which human nature shoots wild and free, though unfit for other improvements, certainly encourages the high exertions of fancy and passion.³

Here the institution of poetry, so commonly associated with learned, polished and polite society, is yoked to the barbarous, the rough, the wild, and the untutored. Indeed the very roughness and imprecision of language in these earlier times means that figures and metaphors, commonly associated with the most sophisticated and refined states of human development, are in fact presented as the characteristic mark of ancient language: in a striking comparison, Blair claims that "An American chief, at this day, harangues at the head of his tribe, in a more bold metaphorical style, than a modern European would adventure to use in an epic poem" (Ashfield and de Bolla 208).

According to Blair's argument, in the infancy of societies men live in a state of nature which is both solitary and simple. With nothing much to distract them, the beauties of nature form their chief entertainment, and they find much in the natural

world to admire and be astonished at. Modern sensibilities find much less to awe and inspire them. Accuracy, correctness, and precision, and “one uniform standard of politeness and civility” are the hall-marks of the modern world, but with progress comes loss: a loss principally of imagination, sprightliness and sublimity, animation and enthusiasm. Suddenly, the world seemed to have grown old. Indeed, the progress of the world resembled the progress of age in man: “The powers of imagination are most vigorous and predominant in youth . . . poetry, which is the child of imagination, is frequently most glowing and animated in the first stages of society” (Ashfield and de Bolla 208). This association of the powers of the imagination with childhood is to have a profound impact on poetry from the 1770s onwards.

Many eighteenth-century British poets felt that the nation had sacrificed Liberty in favour of wealth, luxury, sensual pleasure, and tyrannical power. Poetry seemed enfeebled, emasculated, or poised for flight to the new world. At the end of Goldsmith’s *The Deserted Village* (1770), Poetry migrates, accompanied by the many rural people evicted from their native place by the greed, the sensuality, the highly refined taste for luxury of land-amassing tyrants. Where Gray had once imagined the Muse amongst “Chile’s boundless forests”, Goldsmith now situates Poetry in Peru, by Mount “Pambamarca’s side”:

And thou, sweet Poetry, thou loveliest maid,
Still first to fly where sensual joys invade;
Unfit, in these degenerate times of shame,
To catch the heart or strike for honest fame;
Dear charming nymph, my solitary pride;
Thou source of all my bliss and all my woe,
That found’st me poor at first and keep’st me so;
Thou guide by which the nobler arts excel,
Thou nurse of every virtue, fare thee well!
Farewell, and oh, where’er thy voice be tried,
On Torno’s cliffs or Pambamarca’s side,
Whether where equinoctial fervours glow,
Or winter wraps the polar world in snow,
Still let thy voice, prevailing over time,

Redress the rigours of the inclement clime ...

(Lonsdale 693-4)

In the same year that Goldsmith published his vision of Poetry's emigration, the seventeen-year-old boy genius, Thomas Chatterton, killed himself with arsenic, in a lonely garret in London. Chatterton's grim end became a powerful symbol of the risks attendant upon poetic genius. In the mid-1790s, in the unfriendly atmosphere of counter-revolutionary Britain, two young writers and disaffected radicals, Robert Southey and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, were mindful of Chatterton's fate as they drew up plans to move their poetic operations off-shore. Their utopian ambition was to build a new, egalitarian society called Pantisocracy (meaning "rule of all") on the banks of the Susquehanna River. The opening poem of Coleridge's first published collection, *Poems on Various Subjects*,⁴ was his "Monody on the Death of Chatterton", in which "the bleak freezings of neglect" suffered by Chatterton are experienced by all poetic geniuses:

Is this the land of song-ennobled line?
Is this the land, where Genius ne'er in vain
Pour'd forth his lofty strain?
Ah me! yet Spenser, gentlest bard divine,
Beneath chill Disappointment's shade,
His weary limbs in lonely anguish lay'd;
And o'er her darling dead
Pity hopeless hung her head,
While "mid the pelting of that merciless storm,"
Sunk to the cold earth Otway's famish'd form! (*Poems*, 3)

So intense is Coleridge's identification with Chatterton that he writes him into their American idyll, that "sweet dream,/ Where Susquehannah pours his untam'd stream":

O, Chatterton! that thou wert yet alive!
Sure thou would'st spread the canvass to the gale,
And love, with us, the tinkling team to drive
O'er peaceful Freedom's undivided dale. (*Poems*, 10)

Coleridge's association of Chatterton with the river Avon is a prompt to his reader to think of lineage and inheritance, for the other poet closely associated with the Avon is, of course, Shakespeare. But where Gray had calmly planted Shakespeare, "Nature's darling", by the "lucid Avon" in his *Progress of Poesy* ode (Lonsdale 172), Coleridge imagines Chatterton amidst more sublime scenes, in a pose reminiscent of Gray's Welsh Bard, who had pronounced Edward's doom poised on a precipice over "Conway's foaming flood" (Lonsdale 185):

Ye woods! that wave o'er Avon's rocky steep,
To Fancy's ear sweet is your murm'ring deep!
For *here* she loves the cypress wreath to weave;
Watching, with wistful eye, the sad'ning tints of eve.
Here, far from men, amid this pathless grove,
In solemn thought the Minstrel wont to rove,
Like star-beam on the slow sequester'd tide
Lone-glittering, thro' the high tree branching wide.
And here, in Inspiration's eager hour,
When most the big soul feels the madning pow'r,
These wilds, these caverns roaming o'er,
Round which the screaming sea-gulls soar,
With wild unequal steps he pass'd along
Oft pouring on the winds a broken song:
Anon, upon some rough rock's fearful brow
Would pause abrupt—and gaze upon the waves below.
(Poems, 8)

Nor is Chatterton the only reincarnation in this period of Gray's sublime Celtic Bard. A year after the appearance of Coleridge's volume, Charlotte Smith published her elegiac sonnet on Robert Burns, "To the shade of Burns" (1797). Here the Bard is neither English nor Welsh, but a Scotsman:

Mute is thy wild harp, now, O Bard sublime!
Who, amid Scotia's mountain solitude,
Great Nature taught to "build the lofty rhyme,"
And even beneath the daily pressure, rude,
Of laboring Poverty, thy generous blood,
Fired with the love of freedom—Not subdued
Wert thou by thy low fortune: But a time

Like this we live in, when the abject chime
Of echoing Parasite is best approved,
Was not for thee—Indignantly is fled
Thy noble Spirit; and no longer moved
By all the ills o'er which thine heart has bled,
Associate worthy of the illustrious dead,
Enjoys with them "the Liberty it loved".⁵

The twinned fates of liberty and poetry drive Smith's elegy, as they had driven Gray's *The Bard*, but unlike Gray's Welsh Bard, Smith's Scottish Bard does not hold converse with Kings and nobles; nor is he possessed of prophetic powers. The humble son of an unsuccessful farmer, Burns builds his rhyme whilst bowed down beneath "laboring Poverty". But the labourer-poet is not subdued by his "low fortune"; instead Smith presents him as defeated by the ignominious age in which he lived. The sonnet concludes with the image of Burns enjoying Liberty in death, surrounded by the illustrious dead who include, one imagines, poets of the stature of Milton and Pope, both of whom are quoted in Smith's sonnet.

The opening stanza of Gray's *Progress of Poesy* ode offers a poeticized landscape in which the beginnings of poetry take rise in springs, which in turn issue in numerous rills, rising to a rich stream of music which then plummets into the ocean below:

Awake, Aeolian lyre, awake,
And give to rapture all thy trembling strings.
From Helicon's harmonious springs
A thousand rills their mazy progress take:
The laughing flowers, that round them blow,
Drink life and fragrance as they flow.
Now the rich stream of music winds along,
Deep, majestic, smooth, and strong,
Through verdant vales and Ceres' golden reign:
Now rolling down the steep amain,
Headlong, impetuous, see it pour:
The rocks and nodding groves rebellow to the roar.
(Lonsdale 161-3)

Coleridge's orientalist fantasy, *Kubla Khan* (1797), a poem very much concerned with poetic authority and the vagaries of poetic inspiration, recreates Gray's landscape in its opening stanzas, where the river Alph (a river of language) runs down into "the sunless sea", then later into "a lifeless ocean" (Norton 741-2).⁶ For all its imaginative brilliance, *Kubla Khan* offers a more negative image of the waste of genius than anything to be found in Gray's anxious poem. Kubla Khan's authoritative decree, together with his ambition to shape and harness the energies of this place, are thwarted by mysterious forces, such as the sublime (awe-inspiring) caverns "measureless to man" (where "measure" is a pun on the metre of poetry), and "that deep romantic chasm which slanted/ Down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover!". This chasm is both "holy" and "savage", holy through its association with the source of the sacred river, savage and profane on account of the vampire woman "wailing for her demon-lover!". This demon (and demonized) woman is, in the end, off-set by the muse figure, the damsel with a dulcimer whose song the poet strives to recreate. As though to underscore the remoteness of his chances of reviving her music, however, Coleridge eschews the figure of the modern poet in favour of an older classical model of the divinely inspired poet:

And all should cry, Beware! Beware!
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!
Weave a circle round him thrice,
And close your eyes with holy dread,
For he on honey-dew hath fed,
And drunk the milk of paradise (Norton 742).

Like Coleridge, Wordsworth also had his anxious moments, none more so than in Germany in 1799 when he turned to the back of his notebook and started to reproach himself for failing to get on with the task of writing the great philosophical poem *The Recluse*, a poem "On Man, on Nature and on human Life" which Coleridge had laboured to convince him it was his great poetic destiny to compose.⁷ Eschewing Gray's classical "Helicon" and Coleridge's mythological "Alph", Wordsworth

turns to the river Derwent which flowed behind the house in Cockermouth where he had grown up:

Was it for this—
That one, the fairest of all Rivers, loved
To blend his murmurs with my Nurse's song,
And from his alder shades and rocky falls,
And from his fords and shallows, sent a voice
That flowed along my dreams? For this didst thou,
O Derwent, travelling over the green plains
Near my 'sweet Birthplace', didst thou, beauteous stream,
Make ceaseless music through the night and day,
Which with its steady cadence tempering
Our human waywardness, composed my thoughts
To more than infant softness, giving me
Among the fretful dwellings of mankind,
A knowledge, a dim earnest, of the calm
Which Nature breathes among the hills and groves?⁸

Shaped by the influences of river and sky, with the natural world as his nurse, mother, and educator, Wordsworth is the Rousseauist child of nature, a naked boy bathing on summer days. He is even, perhaps, an Amerindian, a "naked Savage, in the thunder shower". The important difference to note, however, is that the setting is entirely English, and that there is an ambition to make the Derwent as well known as the Avon, or indeed as the Thames, celebrated from the Elizabethans onwards as a potent symbol of English poetry. Another sign of the tremendous poetic confidence that is to be consolidated through these early drafts can be seen in the poetic quotation, "sweet Birthplace", an allusion to Coleridge's *Frost at Midnight*, published in 1798. A few years later, Wordsworth may wish to out-Miltonize Milton in his poetic Prospectus to *The Recluse*, but for the moment the line of great English poetry is an infant one, just twelve months old.

- 1 *The Poems of Gray, Collins and Goldsmith*, ed. Roger Lonsdale (Longman, 1969), pp 180-81; hereafter abbreviated in text to Lonsdale, followed by page numbers.
- 2 Blake's marvellous illustration of this stanza has been recently reproduced on the cover of Margaret Clunies Ross' *The Norse Muse in Britian, 1750-1820* (Trieste: Edizioni Parnaso, 1998).
- 3 From *The Sublime: A Reader in British Eighteenth-Century Aesthetic Theory*, ed. A. Ashfield and P. de Bolla (Cambridge University Press, 1996), 207; hereafter abbreviated to Ashfield and de Bolla, followed by page numbers.
- 4 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Poems on Various Subjects* (Bristol, 1796); hereafter abbreviated to *Poems*.
- 5 *The Norton Anthology of Poetry: Fourth Edition*, eds. M. Ferguson, M. J. Salter, J. Stallworthy (W. W. Norton & Company, 1996), p. 653; hereafter abbreviated to *Norton*.
- 6 John Beer and others have noted the similarity; see Beer's "The Languages of *Kubla Khan*", in *Coleridge's Imagination: Essays in Memory of Pete Laver* eds. R. Gravil, L. Newlyn, and N. Roe (Cambridge University Press, 1985), 229-30.
- 7 For the Prospectus to *The Recluse*, see *William Wordsworth: Oxford Authors*, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford University Press, 1984), 197-99.
- 8 William Wordsworth, *The Prelude: 1799, 1905, 1850*, ed. J. Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams, S. Gill (Norton Critical Edition, 1979), 1.

DEIRDRE COLEMAN teaches in the Department of English, University of Sydney. She has recently edited *Maiden Voyages and Infant Colonies: Two Women's Travel Narratives of the 1790s* and is currently writing a book on colonization in Sierra Leone and Botany Bay.