

## **The Wanderer and the Peripatetic: John Thelwall, a Dissenting Voice in the Alfoxden Circle**

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In an article entitled “The Commitment to Form; or still crazy after all these years”, W.J.T. Mitchell makes an interesting distinction between two forms of commitment: one pointing towards an agenda or an ideal, engaging consciousness and ethics, that he calls “making a commitment”, and a second one, the “being committed” form, which is a form of commitment not consciously made, “something one discovers about oneself” (Mitchell 2003, 323), so that this second form of commitment is either unsaid or repressed and emerges implicitly in textual forms or speech acts. I would like to examine in this paper how this distinction between those two forms of commitment seems particularly relevant to describe the travel writings of three Romantic poets at the turn of the century. In the summer 1797, John Thelwall, William Wordsworth and S.T. Coleridge roamed together the Quantock hills in Somerset, at a time of both seemingly political disengagement yet intensive poetic creation. My intent here is to draw on the works of scholars such as Marjorie Levinson, Tim Fulford and Judith Thompson to try and grasp the political substance of some of their travel writings by contrasting two textual forms figured metaphorically by “the Peripatetic” and “the Wanderer”. As Marjorie Levinson suggests, form is the “unique way that each artwork tries to make symbolic what experience has suggested as actual” (Levinson 2007, 565). Romantic studies in the 1960s would

operate a kind of disjunction between the image and its historical anchorage, turning mountains, lakes, rivers, forests and caverns into embodiments of poetic ideas and values. Increasingly though, Romantic criticism (with the works of Marilyn Butler, Jerome McGann, Alan Liu, Terry Eagleton, Nicholas Roe, Paul Magnuson, Frederick Jameson among others) has re-historicized this complex relation between the poet and the romantic image and inscribed both in specific spots of time and places.

As Robin Jarvis suggests, walking was endowed at that time with political innuendoes and those engaged in this subversive means of transport were in the process of creating a kind of “sub-culture”, resisting mainstream social fixities. Many of those poetic forms created while walking, or at least presented as such by their author, could be defined as a figuration of the poetic thought in act which engages not only the body, affects, feelings, recollections within an environment but also beliefs, namely the poet’s commitment within the world. The travel writings of the Alfoxden poets reflect how they poetically and politically harnessed the landscape, de-figured and re-figured the objects of the natural world into lines and forms to articulate, whether through excess or erasure, their commitment or ambiguous position towards the social and political realm. To put it more simply, the poems, lines, effusions, fragments or sketches of the Alfoxden poets written at that time are not so much about landscape in itself as about the “uses made of it” (Levinson 1990, 17). How do these poetic forms engage with the world? What do they tell us about the forms of commitment the poets took up in the over-politicized public space of the revolutionary decade?

### **1. “Citizen John” and the Alfoxden circle**

Political commitment was clearly a thorny issue during the revolutionary decade and divided societies and circles of friends. We know that the deep enthusiasm of Coleridge and Wordsworth for the French Revolution and their belief in the Millennial quickly gave way to a profound rejection of what was taking place in France. In the years 1793 to 1798, the English government, dreading as much its own population as the foreign enemy, harshly repressed any forms of dissension with legal tools, such as the Gagging Acts of 1795 which controlled the national voice by restricting the size of public meetings to 50 persons and by setting up a spying system to infiltrate public areas. This extremely tangled political context made up of so many dissenting voices, societies and periodicals has been the focus of attention of new Historicists who have

tried to offer a fresh look on poetic and textual forms in the light of those various events and movements. As Jerome McGann underlines, the Romantic “act of evasion operates most powerfully whenever the poem is most deeply immersed in its cognitive (or ideological) materials and commitments” (McGann 1983, 82). “For this reason”, he adds, “the critic of Romantic poetry must make a determined effort to elucidate the subject matter of such poems historically”.

The presence of John Thelwall, “Citizen John”, looms large in the current critical revision of the *Lyrical Ballads* and other poems written during the *annus mirabilis* (1797-1798). Dorothy and William moved in Alfoxden, sadly today a derelict country-house, in July 1797 while Coleridge, whose Romantic pantisocratic scheme had dwindled into pure idealism, settled in Nether Stowey. The influence of one upon the other has been widely recognized in Romantic debates, yet a fourth presence, that of John Thelwall has up to now been a rather fleeting one. Citizen Thelwall was one of the most prominent and radical voices of the democratic reform movement in the 1790s. Member of the Society for Free Debate and later leader of the London Corresponding Society, he was probably the most notorious and feared spokesman for revolutionary change. A fiery orator, he attracted, at the height of governmental hysteria, large crowds during outdoor meetings, advocating universal manhood suffrage, freedom of speech and property reform. In May 1794, along with reformists Horne Took, Thomas Hardy and Thomas Holcroft, John Thelwall was arrested and imprisoned on charges of fomenting revolutionary ideas with his Chaunticlere seditious allegory. Refusing to be silenced, even after nine months spent in the Charnel House of the Tower of London, Thelwall continued his walking and literary journey, denouncing the economic degradation of the rural places and advocating reformist ideas along the road. Out of his experience as reformist, walker and campaigner, he created a literary form which reflects his mode of commitment, *The Peripatetic*, a three-volume excursion published in 1793. Yet harassed and ruined, he abandoned his peripatetic scheme in 1797 and decided to retire to the countryside. Yet the term “retirement” or “retreat” is maybe not the most appropriate one since, as Nicholas Roe suggests, the “excursion to Somerset was less an escape from the dangers of London than a homecoming in a provincial landscape long associated with resistance and rebellion” (Nicholas Roe 2011). Thelwall’s dream of idyllic pantisocratic community rapidly turned sour though with the presence of a governmental spy, John Walsh, sent to Alfoxden to track John Thelwall, now the

most wanted man in the United Kingdom. Forced to leave and pressed by Coleridge not to come back “until the *monstrosity* of the thing is gone off, and the people shall have begun to consider you as a man whose mouth won’t eat them, and whose pocket is better adapted for a bundle of sonnets than the transportation or ambush place of a French army” (Griggs 1957, 343-44), Thelwall finally settled in Llyswen in the Wye Valley of Wales and was visited by his friends a year later in August 1798. This brief episode of political distress which brought “tumults, calumnies (...) and threatened persecutions” not only forced the Wordsworths out of Alfoxden, as the landlord refused to extend the lease, but also exacerbated anxiety and guilt as John Thelwall, from beloved friend, became an undesirable presence. Expelled physically from the Quantock hills ten days after his arrival, his powerful voice though became a haunting and lasting one in the poetic forms of Coleridge and Wordsworth.

## 2. The *Peripatetic* committed form

Recent scholarship has endeavored to highlight the rhetorical obfuscations and displacements in the great poems of the *annus mirabilis*, following Marjorie Levinson’s rereading of four great Wordsworthian poems (1986). Drawing on remarks of her students, she underlines for instance the strange absence of Tintern Abbey in a poem whose topographical title “Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey” is extremely precise. As suggested by M. Levinson, the poem deploys a whole set of stylistic strategies to expunge the historical and social facts.

Once again I see  
These hedge-rows, hardly hedge-rows, little line  
Of sportive wood run wild; these pastoral farms  
Green to the very door; and wreathes of smoke  
Sent up, in silence, from among the trees,  
With some uncertain notice, as might seem,  
Of vagrant dwellers in the houseless woods,  
Or of some hermit’s cave, where by his fire  
The hermit sits alone. (Gill & Duncan 1984, 57, v.15-23)

In the Wordsworthian “wandering form”, the natural objects abridged and turned into lines (“The hedge-rows, hardly hedge-rows, little lines / Of sportive wood run wild”), murmurs, shapes or forms of beauty tell us of the world within. They are fragments of the mind peopling the landscape so that the lyric becomes a closed loop excluding the things without. The apostrophe “O sylvan Wye! Thou wanderer through the wood” (Gill & Duncan 1984, 58, v.57) does not address the natural objects, the river or the

wood, but rather function as “nodes or concretizations of stages in a drama of mind” (Culler 148). As Jonathan Culler remarks, nothing figures better this poetic voice “than the pure O of undifferentiated voicing” (Culler 2001, 142). The “Lines” or “Effusions” written at that time seem less to act as representations of places than as pictures of the mind. To use Coleridge’s words in his essay “On Poesy and Art”, they “make the external internal” and “nature thought” (Coleridge *Literary Remains* 1836, 223)

Now this poem was written one year after Thelwall’s departure for the Sylvan valley and, as Judith Thompson writes, William Wordsworth who revisited in imagination his walking tour with Robert Jones five years earlier, had surely in mind Thelwall’s *Peripatetic*, “the quintessential handbook for radical walkers” (Thompson 2012, 143). Judith Thompson reads those “Lines” as an address, not only to Dorothy, but also to John Thelwall injured in his heart by “evil tongues”, “rash judgments” and “the sneers of selfish men” (Duncan & Gill 1984, 60, v.130). Yet, as the “wandering forms” of Wordsworth or Coleridge displace or repress the social and political events, the “peripatetic form” of John Thelwall moves in an opposite way. Forms and objects in the landscape are not stylized and abstracted to reflect the mind but on the contrary particularized to denounce political abuses. John Thelwall’s *Peripatetic* offers the reader a clear instance of Mitchell’s “making a commitment” form. This medley of poetry, political commentaries and topographical descriptions relates the adventures and encounters of Sylvanus Theophrastus, an alter-ego hero who walks along the road, records landscape observations to feed historical recollections and social reflections in order to “awaken the tender sympathies of the soul” (Thelwall 2001, 73). The landscape is used and interpreted once again but, as Coleridge and Wordsworth’s natural objects die away in murmurs and lines to produce this poetic “perpetual voice”, Thelwall’s writing of natural objects always expands upon the social dimension:

I would that I could depart from the banks of this rivulet with these agreeable impressions only on my mind. But every scene is to the topographer a memento of the ravages of ambition, and the miseries of erroneous policy. (Thelwall 2001, 179)

Coleridge and Wordsworth had read the *Peripatetic* and its dialogic and political form may have influenced Coleridge’s poetic scheme “the Brook” which he described as “a subject, that should give equal room and freedom for description, incident, and

impassioned reflections on men, nature, and society, yet supply in itself a natural connection to the parts, and unity to the whole" (STC, *BL* 1991, 108). Following a stream traced "from its source in the hills" to the sea-port, this poetic scheme modelled itself on the expanded and committed form of the *Peripatetic* which travelled along the route of the river Thames. In Thelwall's "peripatetic form" though, the poetic experience is used to extend beyond the mind to the other and to society at large. In his poem "Lines, written at Bridgwater, in Somersetshire, on 2th of July; during a long excursion, in a peaceful retreat", Thelwall almost mimics the involuting process of the Coleridgean imagination, transcending the particular and the transient to reach the autonomy of the poetic presence of the idea:

O! might my soul  
Henceforth with yours hold converse, in the scenes  
Where Nature cherishes Poetic-Thought,  
Best cradled in the solitary haunts  
Where bustling Cares intrude not, nor the throng  
Of cities, or of courts. Yet not for aye  
In hermit-like seclusion would I dwell  
(My soul estranging from my brother Man)  
Forgetful and forgotten: rather oft,  
With some few minds congenial, let me stray  
Along the Muses' haunts, where converse, meet  
For intellectual beings, may arouse  
The soul's sublimest energies.  
(Thelwall *Poems Chiefly Written in Retirement*)

Unlike Coleridge and Wordsworth's ambiguous poetic acts of evasion though, Thelwall invokes the whole set of romantic airy imagery – the "solitary haunts", "dell romantic", "bubbling brook", "murmur in the gloom", "woodland haunts" - but refuses this disconnection between poetics and politics which implies forgetfulness and estrangement from his brother Man.

### 3. The silencing of dissent

Much has been written on both the haunting presence of John Thelwall in the *Lyrical Ballads* or more generally in the *annus mirabilis* poems and the attempt to silence his voice so that the poetic form could dwindle back to "the stilly murmur of the distant Sea" (Coleridge, "Composed at Clevedon", *Poems 1797*, 96) that tells us of the silent workings of the mind. Judith Thompson has emphasized very aptly the use of the cock-and-owl imagery in the Wordsworth-Coleridge "being committed" poems. Quoting both from the *annus mirabilis* poems and from the Coleridge

*Notebooks*, I would like to suggest that the voice of Nature and its “silent overgrowings” (Duncan & Gill 1984, 14, v.506) was a kind of poetic resistance to the social and political tensions of 1793-1794 which kept surging back in the ambivalent space of the poem. The bird imagery delicately weaved throughout the texture of the poetic forms reveals the deep antagonism which divided Coleridge and Thelwall, antagonism made clear in their epistolary exchange between a commitment to spiritual imagination and one to materialist atheism which left Wordsworth in a kind of in-between position.

“Why so violent against *metaphysics* in poetry?” Coleridge writes to Thelwall pleading him not to “pass an act of uniformity” (Griggs 1957, 215) against poets and accept his shadowing of truth to awaken rapture and wonder in the heart of the listener. Now a few weeks after Thelwall’s departure, Coleridge was extremely dispirited and wrote to him without engaging in that same affectionate banter which could possibly have reconciled the beliefs of both men. In his letter, he strangely lamented the loss of spiritual imagination: “I can contemplate nothing but *parts*, and parts are all *little!* My mind feels as if it ached to behold and know something *great*, something *one* and *indivisible*”. In a further move, maybe of provocation to distance himself further from Citizen John and his reformist beliefs, Coleridge articulated his wish to “float (...) about along an infinite ocean cradled in the flower of the Lotus, and wake once in a million years for a few minutes just to know that I was going to sleep a million years more” (Griggs 1957, 349-350). The letter continues with an extract from Act V of *Osorio* that Coleridge was finishing at the time. So this feeling is somehow ventriloquized, to use J. Thompson’s words, by Alhadra, the Moorish woman in *Osorio* (“I have put this feeling in the mouth of Alhadra my Moorish Woman”) who hears, in the still of the night, the night-bird whose “note comes dreariest in the fall of the year”:

The hanging woods, that touch’d by autumn seem’d  
As they were blossoming hues of fire and gold,—  
The hanging woods, most lovely, in decay,  
The many clouds, the sea, the rock, the sands,  
Lay in the silent moonshine; and the owl,  
(Strange! very strange!) the scritch owl only waked,  
Sole voice, sole eye of all that world of beauty!  
Why such a thing am I? Where are these men?  
I need the sympathy of human faces

To beat away this deep contempt for all things,  
Which quenches my revenge. Oh! would to Alla  
The raven and the sea-mew were appointed  
To bring me food, or rather that my soul  
Could drink in life from universal air! (Griggs 1957, 350)

The scritch owl does not tell of beauty nor does it feed the soul with the divine air of the “One Life”. Rather it estranges man from God. It is the voice of atheism which brings solitude and empties the world of its meaning, turning it into a single unanswered question: “Why such a thing am I?”. In “Fears in Solitude”, Coleridge also refers obliquely to Thelwall’s dissenting voice as “owlet Atheism/ Sailing on obscene wings athwart the noon, / Drops his blue-fringed lids, and holds them close, / And hooting at the glorious sun in Heaven, Cries out, ‘Where is it?’” (Coleridge *PW*, 259, v.82-86). Now these scritches, screeches and hootings, those atheist noises, are also the opening ambiguous sounds and lines of “Frost at Midnight” and “Christabel”:

The Frost performs its secret ministry,  
Unhelped by any wind. The owlet’s cry  
Came loud – and hark again! Loud as before (*PW*, 240, v.1-3)

Yet, if in “Frost at Midnight” this voice is silenced by the retreat within the cottage, then within the narrator’s mind who trades them for “The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible / of that eternal language” (“Frost”, 242, v.59-60), the imagery and sounds are far more ambiguous and threatening, as suggested by Judith Thompson, in Coleridge’s supernatural poem “Christabel”:

Tis the middle of night by the castle clock,  
And the owls have awakened the crowing cock;  
Tu-whit!—Tu-whoo!  
And hark, again! The crowing cock,  
How drowsily it crew. (“Christabel”, 215, v.1-5)

The sound mimicry amplified by the heavy alliteration of the sounds “cr” and “c”, mingling the hooting and crowing creates a dissonant and estranging atmosphere, barely humane, made even more disturbing by the howls of the mastiff bitch answering the clock. In a *Notebook* comparison, Coleridge connected “Men anxious for this world” to “Owls that wake all night to catch mice” (*NB* 178). Was he thinking of Thelwall, the “atheist reprobate”, as he would later address him in a letter? This is clearly open to conjecture but the night bird imagery is always heavily loaded with



speech as pure meaningless noise that must be hushed by the “soothing melody” of the “wandering form”:

Wednesday Morning, 20 minutes past 2<sup>o</sup>clock. November 2<sup>nd</sup>. 1803. The Voice of the Greta, and the Cock-crowing: the Voice seems to grow, like a Flower on or about the water beyond the bridge, while the Cock crowing is nowhere particular, it is at any place I imagine & do not distinctly see. (...) The Cock-crowing has ceased. The Greta sounds on, for ever. But I hear only the Ticking of my Watch, in the Pen-place of my Writing Desk, & the far lower note of the noise of the Fire – perpetual, yet seeming uncertain / it is the low voice of ~~silent~~ quiet change of Destruction doing its work by little & little (NB 1635).

This confrontation of voices is that of poetry, time, history, man and society, but it is also an aestheticized recollection of the Alfoxden years: the perpetual voice of the Greta overgrowing that of the cock crowing (an oblique reference, as suggested by Judith Thompson, to Thelwall’s allegoric Chaunticleer). But what Coleridge hears or mentally absorbs here is not the murmur of the river Greta, the poetic voice seemingly lost in the Quantock Hills, but “the low voice of quiet change, of Destruction”.

Thelwall’s atheist voice was sounding more and more pressing and ominous for Coleridge, who had been imprisoned at Fort Augustus a few weeks earlier during his Scottish tour with the Wordsworths on suspicion of Jacobinite sympathy with the Highlanders. As Tim Fulford remarks, almost nothing in his *Notebooks* or letters is said about this remarkable episode. Only those few words scribbled down to Southey on his return to Keswick :

I have been on a wild Journey -- taken up for a spy & clapped into Fort Augustus -- & I am afraid, they may [have] frightened poor Sara, by sending her off a scrap of a Letter, I was writing to her. -- I have walked 268 miles in eight Days -- so I must have strength somewhere / but my spirits are dreadful, owing entirely to the Horrors of every night” (CL, 981)

Following this very elliptic account of his Highland journey, Coleridge composed in the very same letter “The Pains of Sleep” which Tim Fulford reads as a rhetorical evasion of this distressful moment.

The same bird imagery is traced in Wordsworth’s Alfoxden poems by Judith Thompson and interpreted as a strategy of displacement of voices. Yet, as in “Anecdote for Fathers”, they bear the mark of the poet’s ambiguous stance regarding John Thelwall’s reformist ideas. In “The Idiot boy”, the shouts and hootings enclose

the poem, yet with far less ominous undertones than in Coleridge's supernatural "Christabel":

'TIS eight o'clock,--a clear March night,  
The moon is up,--the sky is blue,  
The owlet, in the moonlight air,  
Shouts from nobody knows where;  
He lengthens out his lonely shout,  
Halloo! halloo! a long halloo! (*WW*, 36, v.1-6)

Again this "nowhereness" of sound is a strange feature characterizing the setting and the dawn of the poem.

The owls have hardly sung their last,  
While our four travellers homeward wend;  
The owls have hooted all night long,  
And with the owls began my song,  
And with the owls must end.

For while they all were travelling home,  
Cried Betty, "Tell us, Johnny, do,  
Where all this long night you have been,  
What you have heard, what you have seen:  
And, Johnny, mind you tell us true."

Now Johnny all night long had heard  
The owls in tuneful concert strive;  
No doubt too he the moon had seen;  
For in the moonlight he had been  
From eight o'clock till five.

And thus, to Betty's question, he  
Made answer, like a traveller bold,  
(His very words I give to you,)  
"The cocks did crow to-whoo, to-whoo,  
And the sun did shine so cold!"  
—Thus answered Johnny in his glory,  
And that was all his travel's story. (*WW*, v.442-463)

As in "Anecdote for Fathers", the cock symbol or rather his mimicked voice, ends Johnny's journey and the poem, accompanied by the "owls in tuneful concert", symbol of Thelwall's pagan atheism. The persistence of Citizen John's voice seems clearly alluded to yet "hidden under layers of sublimely simple subterfuge, which is at the heart of English Romanticism" (Thompson, 2012). And the use of slippages, evasions and other rhetorical obfuscations in the "wandering forms" of the *Lyrical Ballads* attest to the uneasiness of the Alfoxden poets as to the silencing of this dissenting voice which bore the mark of their Jacobin pasts.

Feelings of guilt and anxiety as to their earlier political commitment now associated with the Terror transformed Coleridge's and Wordsworth's early political "committed form" into a more ambiguous and diluted "being committed form". Yet, what speaks to the universal reader in those "wandering forms" is not the crowing voice of John Thelwall but "the perpetual voice of the Vale", this poetic voice which created out of political suffering its own universal and abstracted ideology. The dying away of their political voices may have ensured the persistence of their poetic text. In his preface, John Thelwall equates the publication of the *Peripatetic* to an almost impossible and traumatic coming to birth:

Such is the history of the difficulties through which the hitherto unfortunate Sylvanus Theophrastus, after narrowly escaping being strangled by the midwife in the birth, is brought, at length, before the world. (Thelwall 2001, 73)

This, I believe, raises the question of a possible unequivocal commitment of the Romantic text. Romantic forms, being so deeply engulfed in political betrayal, guilt and anxiety, turned inwards creating those "wandering forms" as "a barricade to resist the violence of historical change and contradiction" (Levinson 1990, 53). It also questions the naming of those poetic works, such as the *Peripatetic*, which resisted this Romantic process of involution and brought back to earth the poetic images in an act of open commitment.

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