

## INTRODUCTION: TRANSCENDENCE AND THE NOVEL

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Transcendence, simply defined, is the act of surpassing a limit, of “going beyond.” To transcend something – an idea, a state of being, or an entire world – is to rise above it. The ability to exceed the bounds of ordinary experience has traditionally been reserved to a select group. Plato named the principal members: madmen, lovers, poets, and prophets.<sup>1</sup> In the Renaissance neo-Platonists found ample precedent in Christianity for praising the same figures; and Shakespeare was only following conventional wisdom when he wrote in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, “The lunatic, the lover, and the poet / Are of imagination all compact” (5.1.7–8). By the Romantic age, however, writers began to claim the power for more people: for artists and opium eaters; for heroes, dreamers, and children; for scientists, social theorists, and revolutionaries. All who shaped the circumstances of life to the pattern of their own desire might possess what Shakespeare called the “fine frenzy.” As a young man, Wordsworth saw glimpses of paradise in the world around him, and he looked forward to the time when these visions would be for everyone “A simple produce of the common day” (*Poetical Works* 5:5). Yet, even in Wordsworth’s time, transcendence involved a measure of violence. One cannot question the limits of one’s own world without paying a distinctive price. Wordsworth tells of transcendent experiences so disorienting that he had to grasp at a wall or tree to recall himself to reality. No matter what value one places on transcendence, the capacity to exceed the bounds of common existence is disruptive. Both the mystic’s truth and the madman’s delusion unsettle ordinary conceptions of reality.

In the world of a novel, such disruptions can be particularly unsettling. As a genre, the novel takes as its special province the recording of the ordinary and the everyday. Its length, prose style, and discursive conventions make possible the detailed observation of people and places, historical events and social institutions. More than any other form, the

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classical novel has recounted the adventures of recognizable men and women in society. Hence the disruptiveness of transcendence is especially visible in this genre.<sup>2</sup> It stands out in relief, as it were, against the prevailing social fabric. More important, it tends to conflict with those aspects of the work that create the illusion of a coherent fictional world. To represent a visionary experience, some element in the novel must transgress the very limits of the world that the rest of the novel has established.<sup>3</sup>

There can be little doubt that, in a novel, a visionary character or event is more out of its element, more a “sport,” than in most Romantic poetry.<sup>4</sup> As a result, novels that include visionary experience tend to pose certain questions about transcendence in their starkest form: How can the Ideal exist in the real world? What is the fate of an eternal Absolute in a fallen universe? The answers that most novels propose are disturbing. One remembers the fate of outcasts, like Ahab in *Moby-Dick* or Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*, whose monomaniacal desires drive them to their end; of saints, like Prince Myshkin in *The Idiot* or Milly Theale in *The Wings of the Dove*, whose purity isolates them; and of lovers, like Werther in *The Sorrows of Young Werther* or Jay Gatsby in *The Great Gatsby*, whose passion destroys them. Whether the Absolute is incarnated as love, goodness, or power, the result is equally severe.

The novel bears testimony to the violence of transcendence in more than just the fate of its protagonists. Structurally, as well, it records the shock that a visionary experience gives to everything around it. In effect, the visionary power is antithetical to realistic representation. Shelley writes that “poetry defeats the curse which binds us to be subjected to the accident of surrounding impressions” (505).<sup>5</sup> But, to most realistic novelists, the bond between characters and “surrounding impressions” is anything but a curse: It is the epistemological basis of their art. A power that distorts our ability to see the world must necessarily conflict with a form in which the accurate representation of the external scene is paramount. Since the Absolute can never be rendered in concrete, descriptive language, an authentic moment of transcendence can call into question the very premises upon which a realistic novel depends. In a fictional world, visionary experiences create unique disorders, unnatural disturbances, which cannot easily be disguised. They are “scandals,” to borrow a term from Claude Lévi-Strauss, events that combine the “conflicting features of two mutually exclusive orders” (8). As scandals, perhaps they should not be disguised. Perhaps the attempt to represent an experience that claims by its very nature to be beyond representation should dictate important alterations in novelistic structure.

In addition to representation, other aspects of the novel are changed by transcendence. Most fiction tells a story, and stories move forward from

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a beginning, through a middle, to an end. Narrated events follow a sequence, even if the chronology of that sequence is scrambled. Transcendence, on the other hand, inevitably breaks the line of a story. A visionary experience disrupts not only the “probable” order of events, in Aristotle’s terms, but the “possible” as well, for the visionary is by definition that which seems impossible. A transcendent episode should record a rupture with the very events that lead up to it and presumably cause it. If a moment of vision truly goes beyond the limits of experience, then it cannot follow seamlessly from experience. To occur in a novel, transcendence must burst the seams of the narrative.

Finally, transcendence radically alters the concept of character. When Saul was called by God on the road to Damascus, he was permanently transformed. Stopped in his tracks, blinded, dazzled with the glory of revelation, he was turned around and sent off in a totally new direction. In a novel, visionary experiences exert a similar pressure on people. A character almost becomes a different person, and perhaps should be given a new name, just as Saul became Paul.<sup>6</sup> In Romantic poetry this transformation is figured directly. After a moment of transcendence the poet becomes a new person, discovers a higher self, or perceives another being within his or her own being. The conventions of the novel, however, rarely allow for such absolute changes in its characters.<sup>7</sup> Generally, the transformation is naturalized as “growth” or “development.” But, if we credit visionary poets from biblical times to the present, the new Being found in transcendence is not a natural growth at all. One never “develops” the visionary. It comes into the self with a shock.

Visionary experience, then, alters a novel in at least three of its aspects: representation, sequence, and character. Shelley, in a striking passage from his “Defence of Poetry,” identifies all three as ways in which a story inevitably differs from his conception of a poem:

There is this difference between a story and a poem, that a story is a catalogue of detached facts, which have no other bond of connexion than time, place, circumstance, cause and effect; the other is the creation of actions according to the unchangeable forms of human nature, as existing in the mind of the creator, which is itself the image of all other minds. The one is partial, and applies only to a definite period of time, and a certain combination of events which can never again recur; the other is universal, and contains within itself the germ of a relation to whatever motives or actions have place in the possible varieties of human nature. (485)

According to Shelley, poetry conflicts with narrative sequence, because a story has “no other bond of connexion” than those Aristotle mentioned – time, place, setting, cause and effect. True poetry, in

Shelley's highly Platonic formulation, employs a higher form of connection, an ideal unity. Further, in poetry character is not finite, not limited by the dress and habits of a single historical moment. Rather, it is "unchangeable," "universal"; it contains within itself the "germ" of a new kind of action, the beginning of a "relation" that is not narrative at all. This new form of relation evokes all the possible varieties of human nature without being restricted to any. Finally, poetry is not a catalogue of "detached facts." It constitutes a mode of representation that does not depend upon "circumstance" or particularity. As he says a few lines later, "The story of particular facts is as a mirror which obscures and distorts that which should be beautiful: Poetry is a mirror which makes beautiful that which is distorted" (485).

#### VISIONARY EXPERIENCE

In order to understand transcendence in the novel we need to define more precisely what constitutes a genuine visionary experience.<sup>8</sup> The Romantic visionary moment is related, on one side, to the ancient tradition of mysticism and, on the other side, to the modern epiphany. It has, however, important differences from both. Like the mystic, a visionary is in touch with some intangible reality, beyond or above this sphere of things. Yet, unlike the mystic, he does not merge with this higher realm; he remains separate and distinct, part of his own world even as he perceives another.<sup>9</sup> Like the modern epiphany, the visionary moment involves an intense burst of insight and a heightened sense of consciousness. Yet, unlike the epiphany, which produces a closer awareness of reality, the visionary power shuts out the senses, cutting one off from the external world.

While we are locating Romantic visionary experience in relation to other literary phenomena, we should note that it is not exactly the same kind of thing as romance. Romance builds airy castles by means of improbable plots. Shipwrecks, disguises, lost twins, secret caskets, and heroic deeds all work in succession to lead the reader to fantastic ends. Events – ceaseless, improbable events – lie at the heart of the form. As Northrop Frye has said, romance is "a sequential and processional form" (*Anatomy of Criticism* 186). The magic is in the action, not in the mind's power to halt all action. Of course, one famous definition of Romanticism speaks of the "internalization of quest romance."<sup>10</sup> But we should always be aware of how great a difference "internalization" makes. Keeping the events of romance within the boundaries of the mind converts their restless, onward momentum into static, lyrical moments. The pause in action that accompanies transcendence frequently prolongs itself for the length of entire poems, so that the "plots" of many

internalized quest romances seem to have been cast into an enchanted paralysis.

By concentrating on visionary experience we may seem to be slighting what has often been taken as the central concept of Romanticism, the creative imagination. The two concepts, however, are closely connected. As Wordsworth says, “Imagination almost always transcends reality” (*Middle Years* 2:170). Hazlitt, too, writes that “the province of the imagination is principally visionary, the unknown and undefined” (5:9). The visionary power, in truth, forms an aspect or a stage in the larger movement of the Romantic imagination. Coleridge defines the imagination as a power that blends or unifies discordant qualities. This “synthetic and magical power,” as he calls it (*Biographia Literaria* 2:16), may seem different from the violent dislocations of transcendence. But we should remember that the imagination not only reconciles opposites but also transforms the world it perceives. As Coleridge puts it, the imagination “dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create” (*Biographia Literaria* 1:304). Wordsworth, in his “Preface to the Edition of 1815,” speaks of “the abstracting, and the modifying powers of the Imagination” that must come into play before the poet can succeed in making “two objects unite and coalesce” (*Prose* 3:33).

In its disruptive phase the Romantic imagination can usurp all the other elements of the poet’s world, but such moments are necessarily brief. The “light of sense / Goes out,” Wordsworth writes in his most important comment on the visionary power of the imagination; “but with a flash that has revealed / The invisible world” (*P.* 6.600–2).<sup>11</sup> To some readers (particularly those raised on voluminous novels), such “flashes” of vision seem incomplete. These readers want to exclaim, “Yes, but what do you *see*? What does the ‘invisible world’ look like?” Questions like these, reasonable enough to deserve an answer, nevertheless proceed from a misunderstanding. Visionary moments often have no specific content. According to Kant, even if the imagination can find nothing beyond the external world, it still qualifies as a visionary power:

For though the imagination, no doubt, finds nothing beyond the sensible world to which it can lay hold, still this thrusting aside of the sensible barriers gives it a feeling of being unbounded; and that removal is thus a presentation of the infinite. As such it can never be anything more than a negative presentation – but still it expands the soul.” (Kant 127)

The inexplicitness of Romantic transcendence accounts for our emphasis on visionary *experience*, rather than on achieved visions.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, it is the Romantics’ very silence on what if anything lies beyond the limits of this world that makes their form of transcendence attractive to many

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novelists. Only a “negative presentation” of the infinite can be carried over into the determinate, social world of the novel.

We have attempted in a brief space to distinguish visionary experience from a variety of related phenomena, but such generalizations naturally have their limits. Categories tend to overlap, and what one writer calls “visionary” another will find utterly mundane. In spite of these difficulties, most visionary moments have certain characteristics in common. Let us turn to some specific examples of Romantic transcendence in order to explore these characteristics. In Wordsworth’s “Intimations Ode” and in the visionary passages of his *Prelude* (the well-known “spots of time”), we can identify at least six elements that are found in almost all transcendent experiences.

To begin with, the poet experiences a loss of sight. The “Intimations Ode” speaks of “those obstinate questionings / Of sense and outward things” (*Poetical Works* 4:283, lines 142–3), and the Simplon Pass episode in *The Prelude* tells of “the light of sense” going out. In essence, the flash of vision blinds the poet to all but the light from another world. Occasionally, this loss of outward perception can be gradual:

Oft in these moments such a holy calm  
 Would overspread my soul, that *bodily eyes*  
*Were utterly forgotten*, and what I saw  
 Appeared like something in myself, a dream,  
 A prospect in the mind. (*P.*2.348–52, italics added)

Second, a visionary often claims access to a realm beyond language. Discussing the visionary power of youth, Wordsworth writes: “in the main / It lies far hidden from the reach of words” (*P.*3.186–7). The incommunicability of visionary experience is sometimes figured by the use of a private language. This trope has a venerable history. In the “Phaedrus” Plato relates that the words of the Delphic oracle and of the Sybil were prophetic only when they seemed most incoherent. From the Bible come numerous instances of this phenomenon, the most famous of which is the pentecostal experience in Acts of the Apostles:

And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance. (*Acts* 2:2–4)

Erasmus, like many later Romantic theorists of visionary experience, combines Plato and the Bible in his description of divine ecstasy: “Those who have the privilege of experiencing this (and it happens to very few) undergo something very like madness: they talk incoherently, not in a human fashion, making sounds without sense” (Erasmus 137).<sup>13</sup>

Third, visionary experience is usually static. The poet who is lost in a visionary trance is not given to moving about. "I was lost," Wordsworth writes, "Halted without an effort to break through" (P.6.597). This slowing or arrest of action is often associated with a sense of permanence, immutability, producing what is sometimes called a "still moment." The epiphanies of Virginia Woolf, which owe so much to the Wordsworthian spot of time, capture the element of stasis beautifully.<sup>14</sup> In *To the Lighthouse* the novel's heroine, Mrs. Ramsay, achieves a moment of perfect poise:

Nothing need be said; nothing could be said. There it was all round them. It partook, she felt . . . of eternity; . . . there is a coherence in things, a stability; something, she meant, is immune from change, and shines out . . . in the face of the flowing, the fleeting, the spectral, like a ruby; so that again tonight she had the feeling she had had once today, already, of peace, of rest. Of such moments, she thought, the thing is made that endures. (158)

The word "eternity," in Mrs. Ramsay's meditation, introduces another aspect of transcendence, the disappearance of ordinary time. From the study of myth and religion we are familiar with the change from *chronos* to *kairos*, from clock time to sacred or ritual time. In Wordsworth's "Intimations Ode" the obstinate questionings of sense and outward things have the power to make "Our noisy years seem moments in the being / Of the eternal Silence" (lines 155–6), and in the Simplon Pass vision, nature becomes "The types and symbols of Eternity, / Of first, and last, and midst, and without end" (P.6.639–40). Another Romantic, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, found that in reveries "time counts for nothing" and "the present lasts forever, without marking its duration in any way, and without any trace of succession" (113). Dostoyevsky, exploring this same idea, has a character in *The Possessed* explain that "there are moments – you can reach moments – when time suddenly stops and becomes eternal" (223).

A fifth characteristic of visionary experience is the transformation of character, the renovation of what Wordsworth calls our "mortal Nature." Transcendence expands the self, giving the poet access to a new being. In the Simplon Pass episode Wordsworth recognizes for the first time his "conscious soul" (P.6.598). On Mount Snowden, in another visionary moment, he says that this new being is like "a mind / That feeds upon infinity," a "mind sustained / By recognitions of transcendent power" (P.14.70–5). The idea that a transformation of the entire person is a consequence of all visionary experiences comes down to us from the Old Testament. Samuel warns Saul that when the Spirit of the Lord enters him he "shall be turned into another man" (1 Sam 10:6). Dostoyevsky picks up this point directly: "Man, as he is constituted on



earth, can't endure [eternity]. He must be either physically transformed or die" (609).

A final attribute of transcendence grows out of the previous one. In a visionary moment, the poet encounters the numinous directly.<sup>15</sup> This contact can be indicated by religious vocabulary, the invocation of a deity, or the incarnation of some spiritual power or absolute. The "obstinate questioning" passage from the "Intimations Ode" is pervaded by a tone of religious awe. In the Mount Snowden vision Wordsworth writes, "Such minds are truly from the Deity, / For they are Powers" (P.14.112–13). Earlier in *The Prelude* he connects godhood with the power of vision that lies within him:

Of genius, power,  
 Creation and divinity itself  
 I have been speaking, for my theme has been  
 What passed within me. (P.3.173–6)

These characteristics, common to most visionary experiences, all relate to some aspect of the novel as a genre. The first two, blindness and the inadequacy of language, have a bearing on the problem of representation. The next two, stasis and timelessness, necessarily affect sequentiality. The final two, expanded consciousness and the influx of divinity, have consequences for the conception of character. Nevertheless, the model of transcendence we have so far presented is too static.

Visionary experience can best be viewed not as a fixed set of characteristics but as a movement between two orders or structures. Considered this way, the visionary becomes a liminal experience, and the movement between structures can be charted as a series of discrete crossings of a threshold.<sup>16</sup> The loss of sight becomes not simply blindness but a shift from one sense to another – generally from sight to sound. In visionary moments Wordsworth feels "whate'er there is of power in *sound* / To breathe an elevated mood, by *form* / Or *image unprofaned*" (P.2.304–6, italics added). In the case of the realm beyond language, the poet figures its power as a shift from one form of discourse to another – from human words to the "ghostly language of the ancient earth" (P.2.309).

Further, the arrest in Wordsworth's visionary moment is not a true halting. To stop completely would end the action of the poem. Rather, there is a shift from one kind of motion to another – from physical action to spiritual motion. In the "Intimations Ode" all external action halts, but the poet finds himself "moving about in worlds not realized" (line 146). The shift from one form of motion to another also signals a larger movement – from one state of consciousness to another. Transformations in identity underlie the entire structure of *The Prelude*, as well as the middle section of "Tintern Abbey." In both, the poet moves from his



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youthful, too-exclusive love of nature to a more broadly inclusive love of nature and mankind.

Finally, since timelessness and the numinous are the most difficult aspects of transcendence to capture in the time-bound structures of language, they profit the most from a liminal structuring. Wordsworth never attempts to present more than natural scenes directly. It is their possibility rather than their presence that his poetry evokes. The only way to represent the unrepresentable turns out to be as a gap between two achieved systems of order. In the leap from one recognizable order to another, Wordsworth intimates the leap beyond all sensible orders. The gap or lacuna left in his text reflects the hole transcendence makes in ordinary life. It is a permanent reminder that the visionary power comes as a shock. The “light of sense / Goes out,” not only in the realm of perception but in that of discourse as well. The ability to make oneself intelligible vanishes along with sight. The invisible realm appears not as a world in its own right but as an absence of other worlds, perceptual and textual.<sup>17</sup>

Before concluding this discussion, we should note the connection between the “cost” of transcendence and its liminal structure. Considered as a threshold, the visionary moment has an economic character. The gains of transcendence are offset by the costs. For a visionary experience to appear authentic, each side of the threshold must be acknowledged. The gain of a spiritual realm compensates for the loss of the real world; the sound of a new music balances the loss of sight; a higher self replaces our original identity. As Wordsworth puts it in “Tintern Abbey,” “for such loss, I would believe, / Abundant recompense” (*Poetical Works* 2:261, lines 87–8). But is any recompense ever truly abundant? The novelists and poets we examine approach this question in different and often conflicting ways. As we shall see, their answers have important psychological, ethical, and literary consequences that may not immediately be apparent.

NARRATIVE FORM

We have seen that transcendence alters a novel in at least three of its aspects – sequence, representation, and character – and that in each case the alteration possesses a liminal structure. Before we can look at how the visionary power works in specific novels, we need to examine in more detail these three aspects of narrative form.

Narrative itself is a simple matter – simple in the sense of elemental, basic, an irreducible part of all other forms of discourse. The impulse to tell a story is one of the most primitive constituents of literature. It lies at the root not just of literature but of language itself, for every sentence tells a story. Each has a subject that performs an action, often on some

object, usually with subsidiary characters who modify the main action.<sup>18</sup> To tell stories seems to be a universal human characteristic. As Roland Barthes says, “Narrative is present in every age, in every place, in every society; it begins with the very history of mankind and there nowhere is nor has been a people without narrative. . . . Narrative is international, transhistorical, transcultural: it is simply there, like life itself” (“Structural Analysis of Narrative” 79). From another perspective, Barbara Hardy makes a similar point: “Narrative . . . is a primary act of mind transferred to art from life” (“An Approach through Narrative” 31).<sup>19</sup>

These considerations are important, for they give substance to what is sometimes thought to be a naive belief about literature. We often imagine that stories have a life of their own. A series of events, merely by becoming part of a narrative, seems to acquire an independent life, an existence undetermined by an author. This sense of autonomous life is what allows even young children to know when a storyteller is “cheating,” and it is what leads even mature readers to believe that a good story has the power to enchant. Both are merely responding to their sense that there is something in the story with its own integrity, something that demands from an author fidelity and care. We say a good story has its own “necessity” – it is the way it had to be.

Our sense that narrative has a life of its own comes from a very real source. Stories *do* possess properties that are beyond the control of the author. These properties are simple ones, the elemental qualities that narrative brings to all discourse: A story must begin, things must happen in a sequence, and the story must end. The most rudimentary narratives – “I lived,” “He loved her” – possess a stubborn autonomy. It is not merely that life ends, or love dies (if only in the consummation of all life and love at the end of time), but also that those stories, in their few words, run an inevitable course, lead their lives from a beginning to an end. Frank Kermode has described this well: “Something begins that must have a consonant end. . . . There will be order” (*Sense of an Ending* 146). At the other end of the spectrum, the most complex and comprehensive narratives – *War and Peace*, *The Golden Bowl*, or *Remembrance of Things Past* – are, to the same limited extent, beyond the control of their authors. Again, this is not simply because “relations stop nowhere,” as James said in the “Preface to *Roderick Hudson*” (*Literary Criticism* 2:1041), but because the stories begin and end in their own places. Naturally, an author chooses those places – a house in Combray, for instance, and a room in Paris – but the choice, once made, inscribes itself within the permanent conditions of narrative. Even attempts to give a novel alternative endings, as in Cortazar’s *Hopscotch* or Fowles’s *French Lieutenant’s Woman*, merely play with the idea of multiple endings, within a field constituted by the inevitability of an ending, and ultimately succumb to the linearity of our reading.