

VAUGHAN, WORDSWORTH, COLERIDGE AND THE *ENCOMIUM ASINI*

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Judging by how infrequently it is honored with literary treatment, the donkey would appear a most inauspicious subject for poetry, perhaps because it can never be taken quite seriously. Its melancholy eyes and patient endurance of suffering may arouse compassion, but its twitching ears and raucous bray can inspire only ridicule. Attempting to weld both aspects of the animal into one poem would seem to insure a jolting disunity of tone. In this article I should like to examine the work of three poets who faced the problem head-on and wrote poems serious in intent about the donkey, most ludicrous of subjects. Henry Vaughan's "The Ass," Coleridge's notorious "To a Young Ass" and that "Wordsworthian choke-pear"¹ *Peter Bell* have generally been passed over by critics in embarrassed silence or condemned as flagrant violations of established canons of taste. But to castigate the poets for their poor artistic judgment is to miss the thrust of their poems, since each wrote in deliberate revolt against the conventionally acceptable, against the commonly received values of the educated classes of his day. In all three poems, this revolt is accomplished through praise of the lowly and laughable donkey.

To attempt any definitive assessment of the artistic merit of the poems in question is beyond the scope of this article. But before we can judge their work we must become acquainted with the long tradition in which the poets were writing: the tradition, or rather the rebellious counter tradition, of the *encomium asini*. By pointing out how each poet borrows from this rich cultural storehouse of veneration for the unvenerable, and by demonstrating how each channels the ridiculous aspects of his subject to contribute to his central purpose, I would hope at least to suggest that these poems were written with greater sophistication than perceptive readers have usually allowed them.

According to a long medieval tradition, the ass is a symbol of the lower classes: dull, plodding, and oppressed by their betters. Already in Ecclesiasticus we read: "Fodder and stick and burdens for

an ass, Bread and discipline and work for a servant,” (Ecclus. 33:24) and “Food for the lion are the wild asses of the desert. Even so, the pasture of the rich are the poor.” (Ecclus. 13:19) Countless medieval sermons and tales reminded their audience that “peasants are of the asinine gender” and elaborated parallels between the beast and its human counterpart.² Being classed with the donkey was as a rule no compliment. To his intellectual and social superiors, the peasant often seemed no more human than the beast he drove: ignorant, uncouth, lacking even the slightest refinements of civilization, and incapable of any social role beyond the most menial servitude.

But if seen from a radically different viewpoint, from the Christian tradition *De contemptu mundi* with its repudiation of all human culture, the ass could serve as a symbol for the ideal spiritual life: poor, lowly, and simple, ridiculed by this world and its wisdom but rewarded in the world hereafter. The donkey plays a privileged role in scriptural history. Sight of the avenging angel was denied to the mighty prophet Balaam but granted to his humble ass. The tidings of Christ’s birth were sung not to princes and potentates, but to lowly shepherds. In the same manner, according to ancient but post-Biblical tradition, it was an ox and an ass who were granted the honor of attending the Nativity, worshipping the Child, and warming Him with their breath.³ And Jesus chose an ass as His mount for the triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Commentators often asserted that just as the donkey was singled out for special favor in the Bible, so the lowly and despised among men are the chosen of God — an inversion of civilized values which attained its liveliest and richest embodiment in the medieval Feast of the Ass.

For cultural historians the Feast of the Ass has been a great bugaboo: a seemingly wanton hodgepodge of hilarity and holiness, of the loftiest Christian truths and the lowest burlesque. Scholars have often tried to account for the feast by denying one extreme or the other. It has been seen as a solemn liturgy whose comic elements are mere corruptions, or as a sacrilegious survival of paganism without any redeeming Christian function. But by recognizing the fundamental serio-comic ambivalence of the Feast of the Ass, we will be better able to understand the tonal complexity of the poems we are about to discuss.

The festival’s keynote was drawn from the Magnificat: “Deposuit potentes et exaltavit humiles.” This dictum was literally enacted — bishops and priests stepped down from their positions of authority and the service was conducted by the otherwise despised choirboys and lower clergy. Every January 14 at Beauvais, for which we have

the most detailed descriptions, an ass bearing a woman and child to represent the Flight into Egypt was led into the church in solemn procession and stationed at the right side of the altar. A mass was sung in which Introit, Kyrie, Gloria and Credo each ended with a bray. The rubrics direct that instead of closing with “*Ite missa est*,” the celebrant was to bray thrice, and the congregation of self-appointed asses to reply in kind. As though the liturgy was not explicit enough, its overturning of the social and intellectual hierarchy was punctuated by such practices as the donning of asses’ ears and the wearing of cassocks inside out.⁴ The Feast of the Ass, widely celebrated in Europe in one form or another, was a living demonstration that “blessed are the humble.” By braying and clowning their way through mass, celebrants and congregation adopted a comic role, but with highly serious intent. For the donkey, standing clumsily before the altar and no doubt swishing away a few fleas, was an emblem of the lower classes themselves; ignorant louts indeed, but made by their very simplicity most acceptable before God.

With the coming of the Renaissance, the ass suffered a certain eclipse. The mainstream of Renaissance thought, intoxicated with classical learning and the cultivation of man’s mental and physical graces, was anything but hospitable to such a childish and anti-intellectual notion as praising a donkey. But the counter tradition survived. The ass of unknowing was incorporated into the philosophy of Giordano Bruno and defended in that witty and learned repudiation of all learning, Henry Cornelius Agrippa’s *De incertitudine et vanitate omnium scientiarum et artium*. The grand conclusion to this controversial work argues that since all human accomplishment is vanity, the mighty and learned of this world are of all men least equipped to accept the otherworldliness of Christian doctrine: “So we read in the Gospell, how Christ was received of Ideotes, of the rude people, and of the simple sorte, who was contemptuously rejected, despised, and persecuted euen to the death by the high Priestes, by the Lawiers, by the Scribes, by the Masters and *Rabbines*: for this cause Christe himselfe also chose his Apostles, not *Rabbines*, not Scribes, not Masters, not Priests, but vnlearned persons of the rude people, voyde welneare of all knowledge, vnskillfull, and Asses.”⁵ There follows Agrippa’s famous “Digression in prayse of the Asse” — a lengthy encomium enumerating its virtues: endurance of hard labor and persecution, patience, innocence of heart, freedom from lice, poverty of understanding, and longevity.

Agrippa goes on to demonstrate the animal’s centrality to pagan

and Christian religious history. Apuleius of Megara in *The Golden Ass* was admitted to the mysteries of Isis only after having assumed the form of that estimable beast. The ass was valued among the Jews, chosen by Christ, and consecrated with the mark of a cross for bearing Him into Jerusalem. Just as Samson slew the Philistines with the jawbone of an ass, so did

Christe in the mouth of his simple Asses and rude Ideots his Apostles & Disciples, ouercome and stryke all the Philosophers of the Gentiles, and Lawyers of the Iewes, and ouerthrowe, & caste vnder foote all mannes wisdom. . . . By these things then which are already sayd, it is more manifest than ye sunne, that there is no beast so able to receyue diuinitie as the Asse, into whome if ye shall not be turned, ye shall not be able to carrie the diuine misteries. In time past among the Romaines the proper name of the Christians was that they shoulde be called *Asinarij*, and they were wonte to paynte the Image of Christ with the eares of an Asse: a witnesse hereof is Tertullian. . . . (fol. 185-86)

Agrippa closes by exhorting his readers and fellow-donkeys not to be ashamed of their lowliness but to cast off human reason and await the divine enlightenment granted only to the asinine in spirit.

Such an outrageously thorough attack on all civilized values did not go unnoticed in England. Agrippa was a notorious blackguard in the eyes of many sixteenth-century intellectuals, and even his translator felt obliged to offer a few words of caution. In a preface, Sanford asserted that reason and its products the arts and sciences are not to be despised but brought to perfection as man's highest attributes, that Agrippa's attack was aimed chiefly against the *misuse* of human reason, and that wherever Agrippa condemned reason itself he was walking in the darkness of ignorance. But the intellectual climate of seventeenth-century England was in some ways more hospitable to pessimism of the *De incertitudine* stamp. Particularly during the years of the Civil War and Protectorate, and especially among those whose conservatism kept them from adjusting to the rapidly shifting social and intellectual currents of the day, there was a marked retreat from the goals which characterized the mainstream of Renaissance humanism. This retreat received its most extreme poetic evocation in the writings of Henry Vaughan.

Vaughan was a highly educated man: a doctor by profession and in his youth, a writer of ingenious verses on love, the contemporary literary scene, and the pleasures of wine and good fellowship. But in the 1655 preface to *Silex Scintillans*, he announced his repudiation of such youthful follies for a narrower poetic realm shrouded in

contempt for the “weighty action” of society and the vanity of secular learning.⁶ Among the complex motives for Vaughan’s literary retrenchment into a private world of spiritual searching, one major factor, as he himself suggests, was the upheaval and disintegration attendant upon the English Revolution. In *Ad Posterios* his own high-church royalist sentiments are clearly implied: “In order that you may be well informed about the times in which I lived, let me tell you that they were cruel. I lived when religious controversy had split the English people into factions: I lived among the furious conflicts of Church and State. At the outset, while the wretched inhabitants raged through their pleasant fields, the base weed laid low the holy rose. They disturbed the fountains, and peace perished beneath the flood, and a gloomy shadow overspread the light of heaven.” (45-46)

In Vaughan’s eyes the revolution was purely destructive, wanton disruption of royal prerogative and the unity of that “holy rose” the Anglican Church. “The Proffer” records his determination to “keep the antient way” rather than succumb to the “smooth seducements” of “Commonwealth and glory” and “cast at night my Crown away” (274-76). By playing on the Crown-Commonwealth opposition, Vaughan evokes a whole range of opposed values, what he saw as pre-revolutionary England’s steadfast respect for political and spiritual authority versus the vacillating opportunism, pride, and sacrilege of his own times. As he more than once suggests, the only way he could preserve his loyalty to the vanished social and ecclesiastical hierarchy during the period of Puritan ascendancy was by making “from those follies a resolv’d Retreat” (“Retirement,” 226). The poet’s yearning for retreat takes many forms: his portrayal of the world as a barren wilderness, his preference for the “sweet harmles lives” (238) of primitives, children, and even animals and plants over the corruptions of civilization. But the *De contemptu* strain in Vaughan’s writings is most emphatically conveyed through his adoption, after the manner of Agrippa, of the dubious and un-gainly literary posture of the ass.⁷

Vaughan’s definition of proper Christian asininity includes many traditional elements. In “The Ass” he scorns the “frail visibles,” ambitions, intellectual striving, and disputation which preoccupy the worldly, in favor of simple-minded fidelity to Christian truth:

Let me thy Ass be onely wise
To carry, not search mysteries;
Who carries thee, is by thee lead,
Who argues, follows his own head. (318)

Following tradition, he links the donkey with the lower classes. Adopting the role of one implies special sympathy for the other:

Above all, make me love the poor,
Those burthens to the rich mans door,
Let me admire those, and be kinde
To low estates, and a low minde. (319)

But “The Ass” is more than a rephrasing of received ideas. Indeed, the poem makes little sense as a whole unless we recognize how closely Vaughan’s self-appointment to the role of donkey was bound up with his determined fidelity to the then-defunct monarchy and Anglican Church.

The *encomium asini* as practiced in the medieval Feast of the Ass and preached in Agrippa’s *De incertitudine* was, by implication at least, subversive of political and religious authority. If the thick-witted and menial are not only capable, but *most* capable of spiritual enlightenment, then why must they be subjected to a hierarchy less worthy than themselves? But in seventeenth-century England the *encomium asini* was set to work justifying the traditional hierarchy and glorifying abject obedience to the authority of crown and miter. In *A Vision of Balaams Asse*, Peter Hay described his conversion from heretical Catholicism to unquestioning Anglican orthodoxy as a long journey through foreign lands and ideologies which ended at last in his abandonment of intellectual searching to become “a simple Asse in Christian knowledge.”⁸ For Peter Hay, proper Christian asininity meant mute submission to the temporal and spiritual powers-that-be, humble bearing of the cross of servitude on earth for an eternal reward in heaven.

Achieving donkeyhood carries the same connotations in the poetry of Henry Vaughan. In “The Constellation,” he prays for a return to an ordered pre-revolutionary England reflecting the harmony of the celestial hierarchy:

Settle, and fix our hearts, that we may move
In order, peace, and love,
And taught obedience by thy whole Creation,
Become an humble, holy nation. (237)

But amidst the rabid controversialism and burgeoning sectarianism of mid-century, he could not hope to see his vision of the ideal England actually brought into being. Rather, he turned inward, striving to apply in his own life the principles whose abandonment he deplored in society at large. While the English revolutionaries were clamoring for political and religious liberties, Vaughan found

his liberty in servitude. In “The Ass” the personal and public connotations of obedience are welded into one:

Teach both mine eyes and feet to move
Within those bounds set by thy love;
Grant I may soft and lowly be,
And minde those things I cannot see;
Tye me to faith, though above reason,
Who question power, they speak treason. (318)

Given Vaughan’s conviction that any challenge to established authority is both treasonous and anti-Christian, there was no possibility for a compromise with current political realities. He had no choice but to deny himself the free exercise of his talents and intellect, and shoulder in obscurity his ass’s burden of patient, humble endurance.

Matthew 21:2 records that in preparation for Palm Sunday, Christ ordered his disciples, “Go into the village over against you, and straightway ye shall find an ass tied, and a colt with her: loose them, and bring them unto me.” These animals were traditionally seen as symbolizing the people of God, bound to slavery under the Old Law, but freed by the coming of Christ and His institution of the New. However this freedom was relative, not absolute. According to Peter Hay, the ass and its colt of Matthew 21 signify the Jews and the Gentiles, “who were fettered and bound to blindness, the one to Ethnicke Idolatry, the other to vaine legall Ceremonies, and were both to be loosed, and by the liberty and grace of the Gospel, to be reduced to the obedience of Christ” (14).

Vaughan, too, interpreted the loosing of the ass colt as implying only the freedom for simple servitude. In “Palm-Sunday” he rejoices that, like the “harmless, yong and happy Ass” untied that it might bear Christ into Jerusalem, he has been granted the liberty of meekly following his Master’s will (295). For Vaughan, the sole freedom worth finding is freedom from entanglement with the tinsel allurements of this world which blind man to his other-worldly destiny. The ass perceives life’s material solaces as mere thistles,

Pricking his lips, till he doth mourn
And hang the head, sighing for those
Pastures of life, where the Lamb goes. (“The Ass,” 319)

Real Christian liberty — the final untethering of the ass — comes only with death. Then, as the closing lines of “The Ass” foretell, he will be released at last from his barren wilderness-prison, relieved of his burdens, and allowed to drink from the springs of everlasting life:

heavenly liberties granted only to those who live in humble suffering on earth.

Vaughan was not so enthralled by his exultant vision of the donkey's eternal reward that he failed to recognize the inherent ludicrousness of the animal so honored. He was quite aware that his self-abasement to the thistle-patch level of a stupid and inelegant quadruped could not fail to strike most of his contemporaries as ridiculous. In fact, ridiculousness was precisely the effect he was striving to achieve. For only by savoring fully every ludicrous implication of Vaughan's role could his readers measure the magnitude of his revolt against the values he found dominant in society around him.

By their response to the poet's asininity, readers would reveal their own spiritual condition. Those who grasped and shared the deadly serious revulsion which motivated Vaughan's seemingly comic descent into dullness would thereby declare their own enlightenment. But those who scoffed would, in effect, commit blasphemy, since to mock the Christian ass is to mock the God who ordained its role. "Let me be wise to please thee still, / And let men call me what they will" (319). The proud may jeer, but, as Vaughan darkly hints in "The Proffer," "There's a reward for them and thee" (275). He who scorns the ass's burden of lowly servitude on earth may find himself condemned to eternal bondage in the hereafter.

For Vaughan the *encomium asini* was unquestionably a means for rebellion. But his rebellion was based on what in modern political terminology would be called a reactionary impulse. In rejecting the prevailing social and intellectual values of his day, he was advocating not progress, but regress, the recovery of an idealized pre-revolutionary England whose populace bore in reverent submission the benevolent despotism of crown and church. On turning, however, to the next significant English appearance of the *encomium asini*, in the poetry of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, we find the counter tradition put to work for precisely the opposite purpose. If Vaughan mourned that the revolution had taken place, Coleridge complained that it had not gone far enough.

"To a Young Ass, Its Mother Being Tethered near It" was written in 1794, during Coleridge's student days at Cambridge, when his political radicalism and his plans for Pantisocracy were at their ardent height. He contemplates a tethered ass and its colt, the traditional animals of Matthew 21, but he is far from considering their lowly condition an ideal for human imitation.⁹ Those very traits which Vaughan found most admirable — the donkey's patient en-

duration of suffering, its humble posture, apparent obliviousness to the world's allurements, and ability to survive on little — are for Coleridge the intolerable evidence of oppression:

But what thy dull'd spirits hath dismay'd,
That never thou dost sport along the glade?
And (most unlike the nature of things young)
That earthward still thy moveless head is hung?
Do thy prophetic fears anticipate,
Meek Child of Misery! thy future fate?
The starving meal, and all the thousand aches
"Which patient Merit of the Unworthy takes"?
Or is thy sad heart thrill'd with filial pain
To see thy wretched mother's shorten'd chain?¹⁰

Coleridge's sympathies are not aroused merely by concern for the prevention of cruelty to animals. He draws the traditional parallel between the ass and its lower-class master, both fettered and starved in an England of supposed freedom and plenty:

Poor Ass! thy master should have learnt to show
Pity — best taught by fellowship of Woe!
For much I fear me that *He* lives like thee,
Half famish'd in a land of Luxury! (75)

The ass colt shows more humanity than its human master by commiserating with the plight of its mother, pitilessly enchained by a man himself in chains. But the ultimate fault, in Coleridge's eyes, lies not in the poor peasant who abuses his donkey. Rather, the social system itself is to blame. By its subjection of the masses to the power and wealth of a privileged few, English society insured the brutalization of its lower levels. And if oppression is inherently dehumanizing, how can its victims be blamed for displaying inhumanity? The only way out of the trap was the abolition of special privilege. Through his musing on the suffering of the donkey, Coleridge was advocating the eradication of all vestiges of the hierarchical social structure Vaughan had longed to restore in its entirety.

"To a Young Ass" seems to have been inspired in part by a disagreement with Southey over the precise nature of the Pantisocracy they planned to found in America. As the Greek components of its name imply, Pantisocracy was to be a society based on the absolute equality of all. When Southey expressed interest in taking along a servant, Shadrach Weekes, Coleridge responded with enthusiasm: "SHAD GOES WITH US. HE IS MY BROTHER!"¹¹ But when he gathered that Southey intended Shad as the nucleus of a servant

class, Coleridge objected. In a letter written October 21, 1794, (three days before the probable composition date of “To a Young Ass,”) he insisted that for one man to perform the menial chores of another was incompatible with the ideal of Pantisocracy. This conviction was reaffirmed in a letter of November 3: “To be employed in the Toil of the Field while *We* are pursuing philosophical Studies — can Earldoms or Emperorships boast so huge an Inequality? . . . A *willing Slave* is the worst of Slaves — His *Soul* is a Slave.”¹²

For the Coleridge of 1794, Vaughanian humility clearly held no attraction. It is not in heaven, but on this earth that the lowly must shake off their shackles. “To a Young Ass” is the distillation of Coleridge’s hopes for Pantisocracy. The poem turns the *encomium asini* against itself, employing its characteristic elements to deny its basic tenet of the holiness of poverty and humility. Through the traditional motif of freeing the ass colt, Coleridge calls for the relief of all human asses from their unjust burden of servitude. As the donkey is to be unchained from its thistle-patch to graze in lush green grasses, so must the poor be lifted from their miserable degradation and given a fair share of life’s pleasures:

Innocent foal! thou poor despis’d forlorn!
I hail thee *Brother* — spite of the fool’s scorn!
And fain would take thee with me, in the Dell
Of Peace and mild Equality to dwell,
Where Toil shall call the charmer Health his bride,
And Laughter tickle Plenty’s ribless side!
How thou wouldst toss thy heels in gamesome play,
And frisk about, as lamb or kitten gay!
Yea! and more musically sweet to me
Thy dissonant harsh bray of joy would be,
Than warbled melodies that soothe to rest
The aching of pale Fashion’s vacant breast! (75-76)

Clearly, our poet’s belief in egalitarianism was fervent enough that he was willing to make a donkey of himself to support it. In later years, Coleridge himself tossed off his early radicalism as a mere whim of adolescence, thus opening the way for subsequent critical contempt for “To a Young Ass” as an extravagantly tasteless monument to the superficiality and immaturity of its creator.

But whatever his later views, Coleridge took Pantisocracy very seriously indeed in 1794 and 1795: the poem’s message is mirrored not only in letters, but in the poet’s speeches and essays as well.¹³ Nor can we assume that the numerous breaches of good taste in “To a Young Ass” prove their author’s inadequate mastery of the art of

poetic finesse. For Coleridge was, after all, writing squarely within the counter tradition of the *encomium asini*. In announcing his kinship with the donkey, in investing the animal with the borrowed grandeur of Shakespearean soliloquy (“That patient merit of th’ unworthy takes,” *Hamlet*, III, i), in peopling the animal’s future pastures with ridiculously high-flown personifications, and in claiming to prefer a good bray over the more delicate harmonies of civilized society, Coleridge was being quite intentionally ludicrous.

But in accordance with the *encomium asini*, he used the comic to serve a sober cause. By keeping poetic company with a “Young Jack Ass,” as the animal was even more indelicately termed in the original title, Coleridge flouted his defiance of the conventionally acceptable and advertised his allegiance to the unconventional, then unacceptable principle of the equality of all men. By their response to the poet’s asininity, readers would unmask their own prejudices. Those who shared Coleridge’s humanitarian goals would recognize the solemnly urgent message at the core of his poem. The true jackasses would be those who laughed in uncomprehending derision.

Like “To a Young Ass,” Wordsworth’s *Peter Bell* was written in revolt against the standards of polite society. But Wordsworth’s revolt, though distinctly political in its implications, was literary in its central thrust. In his preface to the second edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*, he declared his refusal to write in conformity with the educated public’s conception of what poetry should be. His potential readers presumably accepted the neoclassical doctrine that a long poem on a serious subject must be distinguished by an elevated style and personages whose dignity of rank or heroic accomplishments marked them apart from the common man. But *Peter Bell* makes mockery of such narrow poetic taste. Its theme is the power of natural things to deepen the humanity of mankind, a belief close to the core of Wordsworth’s philosophy. Yet this serious matter is treated in a style alternating between bombast and doggerel, and through characters which are ignominious asses, one a man and the other an animal.

Among the few English poems to fall victim to parody even before its public appearance, *Peter Bell* has been castigated from that day to this for its tonal imbalance, its reckless commingling of imbecility and sublimity.¹⁴ If the poem is evaluated according to the very critical canons its writer set out to defy, it will of course be condemned. By keeping the homely figure of a donkey at the center of such a long and ambitious poem, Wordsworth signalled that *Peter*

Bell was no mere follower of literary fashion to be judged by received standards of decorum, but a new creation best understood through the serio-comic counter tradition of the *encomium asini*.

The poem's prologue dramatizes Wordsworth's rejection of the traditional style and subject matter of epic and romance. He sets out in a wondrous boat which whisks him up among the planets, playground of the gods of epic, then promises to fly him to the "realm of Faery" and the earthly paradise of romance.¹⁵ But the poet turns his back on these exalted heights and comes back down to earth. His subjects will be drawn not from the grand and marvelous, but from the everyday "mirth and tears" of the humble folk around him (336). And his listeners will be no refined cognoscenti, but a country squire and his unsophisticated friends.

Having spurned the sublime hexameters of epic, Wordsworth is obliged to limp along on his own "two poor legs" (338), a clear warning that his own poetic "feet" are not to be judged by the same artistic standards as those of a Virgil or a Spenser. Still dazed from his whirlwind tour of the universe, Wordsworth begins his tale of Peter Bell *in medias res*, according to the rules of classical epic. But his plain-spoken listeners quickly call him to task:

"Hold!" cried the Squire, "against the rules
Of common sense you're surely sinning;
This leap is for us all to bold;
Who Peter was, let that be told,
And start from the beginning." (339)

Finally the storyteller finds his own poetic voice and recounts in the matter-of-fact jargon of a ballad his mundane tale of a potter and an ass.

Peter Bell is a conversion story. Its protagonist is transformed from a brutal beast into a "good and honest man" (382). This remarkable alteration is accomplished not from on high, through the miraculous appearance of an admonitory angel or a thunderous voice from heaven, but from below, quite literally from beneath, in fact, since the primary agent of Peter's conversion is the very creature on which he rides.

Like Coleridge's "To a Young Ass," Wordsworth's poem contrasts a humanitarian donkey with a much less humane man. When we first meet him, Peter is a heartless, faithless wretch without one redeeming quality, insensible to the beneficent influences of nature which even his baggage animals feel (341, ll.251-55). From the moment he encounters the solitary ass in the dell, Wordsworth plays off the beast's steadfast fidelity to its dead master, its mournful demeanor

and half-starved self-denial, against the venial loutishness of Peter himself. But though impervious to kindness, Peter is gradually transformed through fear. By a series of incidents in themselves quite trivial and everyday but blown up in his superstitious mind to menacing proportions, he is jolted into developing a human conscience.

Wordsworth documents this process by focussing on the ass — a simple animal seen from multiple perspectives. The storyteller himself consistently regards the donkey with sentimental benevolence, but Peter's viewpoint fluctuates wildly, mirroring the gamut of emotions through which he runs in the course of his humanization. Seeing the ass through Peter's eyes, we are allowed to gauge the alterations in his psychological state. He first considers it a mere piece of loot. But when it inexplicably refuses to move despite repeated blows, he becomes so convinced of its malevolence that even the motion of one of its ears strikes him as a hostile act. Far from pitying the poor groaning beast, he resolves to drown it, until halted by its brays. The sound of the first cheers him by its very familiarity, but the second chills his bones. The shock of discovering the donkey's dead master removes Peter so far from himself that he feels a few twinges of pity for the animal. Having previously tried to force it into obedience, he becomes chastened enough to obey it, accepting its mute invitation to mount its back.

When the ass abruptly changes pace to follow the cries of its master's son, Peter is convinced he is riding to some terrible doom and feels the first stirrings of guilt. The sight of the animal's blood arouses a complex response: first terror, then relief that he knows its source, then stronger guilt that his blows have caused it to flow. At the very moment when Peter abandons his old, evil self, he notices the mark of the Cross on the donkey's shoulders, and before long he is sighing, "Oh! would, poor beast, that I had now / A heart but half as good as thine!" (381) In Peter's perception, the donkey has been metamorphosed from evil demon to spiritual model through the events of one harrowing night.

Peter's was not the only conversion which interested Wordsworth. He also sought to convert the educated public, to shake them out of their preconceived notions of proper decorum and into accepting a much wider range of subjects and language as suitable for serious poetry. Like the humble potter himself, readers of *Peter Bell* are subjected to shock treatment. Wordsworth never allows us the luxury of a single response. His narrative constantly switches track, jumping from the ludicrous to the lofty and back again, coercing us

into recognizing that the poem's events partake of both the farcical and the epic, proving to us the futility of insisting on such arbitrary categorizations.

In true *encomium asini* style, this obfuscation of traditional distinctions is accomplished largely through the figure of the donkey. The animal is in some respects a hero-saint, having endured such extreme privation and suffering out of pure, disinterested loyalty. So it appears to Peter at poem's end, and the narrator, as though speaking of some exalted personage or the relics of a martyr, claims the good fortune of having seen it with his own two eyes. But Wordsworth never allows us to forget that the quadruped in question is, whatever its nobility of spirit, a donkey.

Its physical mannerisms are delineated in ludicrous and verbose detail. Suspense is shattered by a turn of the ass's ear, a gesture rendered yet more ludicrous by its precise repetition in the stanza immediately following:

All, all is silent — rocks and woods,
All still and silent — far and near!
Only the Ass, with motion dull,
Upon the pivot of his skull
Turns round his long left ear. (348)

Wordsworth carefully documents the “hard dry see-saw” of the donkey's bray (351) and even its hideous toothy grin — a phenomenon unusual enough that the narrator feels obliged to testify to its genuineness (370).

The comic incongruity of all this donkey lore is heightened by the use of ponderous and portentous diction. The beast's very groans are numbered as though uttered by some dying hero:

His lank sides heaved, his limbs they stirred;
He gave a groan, and then another,
Of that which went before the brother,
And then he gave a third.

All by the moonlight river side
He gave three miserable groans. (349)

When the ass stands up, this simple act is rendered through epic simile:

Now — like a tempest-shattered bark,
That overwhelmed and prostrate lies,
And in a moment to the verge
Is lifted of a foaming surge —
Full suddenly the Ass doth rise! (357)

But this grandiose image is punctured in the very next stanza when the animal licks Peter's hand as docilely as a little dog.

Wordsworth uses a technique of mock epic — grand language for a trivial subject — but without creating a mock-epic effect. In a poem like Pope's *Rape of the Lock*, the epic machinery serves to prick the balloon of human pride and point out the insignificance of the seemingly important. But the ass in *Peter Bell* is a creature too naturally humble to require belittling. For Wordsworth, the machinery of epic served precisely the opposite aim: to demonstrate the importance of something which appears insignificant. The donkey is the lowliest and most ludicrous of beasts, as the poet insists we recognize. But it is nonetheless worthy of serious literary consideration. Indeed, in Wordsworth's eyes, its very ignominiousness makes it most appropriate for the noble philosophical task of *Peter Bell*: the proof that through the most inconsequential of her creatures, nature exerts a power strong enough to soften the most unregenerate of hearts.

The third and final part of *Peter Bell* opens with the poet's self-mocking struggle to transcend his jog-trot style for an elevation more in keeping with an event so momentous as the potter's conversion. He admits a certain lack of gravity in earlier portions of the poem: "I've played, I've danced, with my narration," and attempts to mend past levities through an epic apostrophe to the mighty "Spirits of the Mind" (369), but finally gives up tinkering with magnificence in an exasperated pseudo-Miltonic disclaimer of fitness for "such high argument" (369). Returning to his own pedestrian voice, he continues his semi-facetious recital of such happenings as the grin of the ass, noises from a mine, and the ranting of a Methodist out of an obscure chapel. But though unimportant in themselves, these events have a devastating impact on the poor potter and force him to a tearful spiritual crisis.

At the very moment of Peter's conversion, the narrator abruptly turns and speaks to the ass:

'Tis said, meek Beast! that, through Heaven's grace,
He not unmoved did notice now
The cross upon thy shoulder scored,
For lasting impress, by the Lord
To whom all human-kind shall bow;
Memorial of his touch — that day
When Jesus humbly deigned to ride,
Entering the proud Jerusalem,
By an immeasurable stream
Of shouting people deified! (377)

This sober evocation of the donkey's place in Christian history, appearing as it does amidst a potpourri of half-jesting trivialities, has struck numerous critics in Wordsworth's day and our own as an artistic mistake. Even the poet himself removed the two stanzas from the 1827 version of *Peter Bell*, presumably, as he later expressed it, out of unwillingness to "shock any pious person with unjustifiable approximation of sacred topics to profane."¹⁶ But Wordsworth later regretted this failure of nerve, for the stanzas were restored in the version of 1832.

And a failure of nerve it was. Far from violating the artistic integrity of the poem these solemn lines addressed at its very climax to that laughable beast the donkey, provide the ultimate defense of Wordsworth's poetic method. Christ Himself was a great subverter of tradition who chose to accomplish His epic task in a low style. Scorning the wealthy and educated of "proud Jerusalem," He kept company with peasants and fishermen and rode to accomplish His heroic mission on the humble back of an ass. In commemoration of His inversion of conventional values, medieval Christians brayed before the high altar and the Renaissance skeptic Agrippa advocated the donning of ass's ears as proof of noble Christian dedication. For Wordsworth, the serio-comic, gross yet exalted spirit of the *encomium asini* was both instrument for and final vindication of his daring monumentalization of lowliness in the poem *Peter Bell*.

Each of the poets here discussed took fuel from a common counter tradition to spark his own highly individual rebellion against a received *status quo*. But originality and seriousness of purpose are in themselves no guarantee of literary merit. Whatever their impassioned intentions, our poets can still be accused, as they so often have been, of having written terribly bad verse. I have no wish to contest the legitimacy of such accusations, but would like to offer one thought in closing: that is, that the *encomium asini* is its own artistic insurance policy. When a poet writes in praise of a donkey, he is automatically immune to attack. To any who would argue that his verse is flat, crude, repetitious, banal, and fatally uneasy in tone, he can always reply: "Very good. I see by your indignation that I have perfectly fulfilled my poetic aim, since it was in revolt against your refined, complacent, traditional notions of what good poetry is that I praised the donkey in the first place." By choosing to focus on a subject so grotesquely unacceptable, the poet forces his readership to reexamine its own standards of aesthetic and social acceptability. Vaughan urged Englishmen to return to the hierarchies of the past; Coleridge and Wordsworth challenged them to abandon the age-old

habit of thinking hierarchically. To trace poetic praise for the lowly ass from Vaughan to Coleridge to Wordsworth is to chart a bold attempt at artistic liberation which paralleled — indeed anticipated — the political emancipation of the common man.

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FOOTNOTES

¹ Lascelles Abercrombie, *The Art of Wordsworth* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1952), p. 135.

² See, for example, Nicholas Bozon's *Metaphors*, tr. J. R. (London: Constable, 1913), pp. 12, 40-41, 156; G. G. Coulton, *The Medieval Village* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1925), p. 235; and G. R. Owst, *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1933), p. 253.

³ The ox and ass do not appear in the Luke account, but were added by conflation with Isaiah 1:3, promulgated in the homilies of Gregory the Great, and popularized in the pseudo-Bonaventura's *Meditationes Vitae Christi*. For general studies of the ass in medieval spirituality, see Louis Réau, *Iconographie de l'art chrétien* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1955-1959), I, 125; and Félix Clément, "Drame Liturgique: L'Âne au Moyen Age," *Annales archéologiques*, 15 (1855), 373-86; and 16 (1856), 26-38.

⁴ For description and interpretation of the Feast of the Ass, see E. K. Chambers, *The Medieval Stage* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1903), I, 280-88; II, 280-81 *et passim*; Jules Michelet, *Satanism and Witchcraft*, tr. A. R. Allinson (New York: Citadel, 1963), pp. 14-15; and A. P. Rossiter, *English Drama from Early Times to the Elizabethans* (New York: Hutchinson, 1950), pp. 48-58.

⁵ *Of the Vanitie and vncertaintie of Artes and Sciences*, tr. Ia. San [ford] (London, 1575), fol. 184. For other Renaissance treatments of the ass, see Frances A. Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1964), pp. 259-61; Desiderius Erasmus, *The Colloquies*, tr. Craig R. Thompson (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1965), p. 418 ("Cyclops or The Gospel Bearer"); and the notes to John M. Steadman, "Una and the Clergy: The Ass Symbol in *The Faerie Queene*," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 21 (1958), 134-37.

⁶ *The Complete Poetry of Henry Vaughan*, ed. French Fogle (New York: Norton, 1964), p. 322 ("Childe-hood") and pp. 255-61. Future references from this very useful paper edition will be indicated by page number in the text.

⁷ Vaughan need not, of course, have been directly dependent on Agrippa, for the *encomium asini* was widely known in seventeenth-century England. See Alexander C. Judson, "Cornelius Agrippa and Henry Vaughan," *MLN*, 41 (1926), 178-81; and Don Cameron Allen's reply in "Henry Vaughan's 'The Ass,'" *MLN*, 58 (1943), 612-14. St. Paulinus of Nola, whose life Vaughan translated, compared himself to an ass throughout his letters. See the *Letters of St. Paulinus of Nola*, tr. and ed. P. G. Walsh (London: Longmans, 1966-67), I, 96, 106.

⁸ *A Vision of Balaams Asse* (London, 1616), p. 18.

⁹ "To a Young Ass" has not, to my knowledge, been discussed in terms of the *encomium asini*, although there can be little doubt that Coleridge was well acquainted with it. His 1794 proposal in the *Cambridge Intelligencer* for publication of *Imitations from the Modern Latin Poets* indicates that he was reading widely in Renaissance literature at the time. As indicated in notes 5 and 7 above, the *encomium asini* was so widely used in that literature that it would have been difficult for Coleridge to miss it. In any case, the essence of the tradition was commonplace enough that Wordsworth was able to claim in 1819 that the origin of the cross on the

donkey's back was very widely known. See *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), II, 530. Useful general commentary on "To a Young Ass" is to be found in E. K. Chambers, *Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), p. 32; and Carl R. Woodring, *Politics in the Poetry of Coleridge* (Madison: Univ. of Wisc. Press, 1961), p. 48.

¹⁰ *The Poems of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1935), pp. 74-75. Future quotations from this edition will be indicated by page number in the text.

¹¹ *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), I, 103 (no. 59).

¹² *Ibid.*, I, 122 (no. 68).

¹³ See *The Collected Works*, Vol. I, ed. Lewis Patton and Peter Mann (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1971), pp. xxviii, xxix, lv, and in particular the sixth of Coleridge's *Lectures on Revealed Religion*, p. 229; and *The Collected Works*, Vol. II, ed. Lewis Patton (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1970), pp. 110-11, where in *The Watchman* No. III Coleridge publishes a poem by James Bisset on the government's muzzling of "John Bull's simple Ass."

¹⁴ Alone among the poems here discussed *Peter Bell* has received extensive, if usually negative, critical commentary. For representative evaluations, see John E. Jordan's survey of 1819 opinion in "The Hewing of Peter Bell," *SEL*, 7 (1967), 598; George McLean Harper, *William Wordsworth: His Life, Works, and Influence* (New York: Russell, 1960), II, 560-61; and Bernard Blackstone, *The Lost Travellers: A Romantic Theme with Variations* (London: Longmans, 1962), pp. 132-33. The studies I have found most enlightening for my purposes are the appendix to Abercrombie's *The Art of Wordsworth*; John E. Jordan's "Wordsworth's Humor," *PMLA*, 73 (1958), 81-93; Melvin R. Watson, "The Redemption of Peter Bell," *SEL*, 4 (1964), 519-30; and Carl Woodring's "Peter Bell and 'The Pious,'" *PQ*, 30 (1951), 430-34.

¹⁵ *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. de Selincourt, II, 335. Future quotations from this edition will be indicated by page number in the text.

¹⁶ Quoted in Woodring's "Peter Bell and 'The Pious,'" p. 432, from an August 30, 1837 letter to Richard Howitt published before Woodring only in the daily *Argus* of Melbourne, Australia.