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Tales of the Psychosomatic in the *Lyrical Ballads*

The year 1800 saw the publication of John Haygarth's historic pamphlet *Of the Imagination as a Cause and as a Cure of Disorders of the Body,* an inquiry into what we now know as the nocebo and placebo effects. The same year saw the second edition of Wordsworth and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads*, two of which portray the power of imagination over the body, for good or ill. However, while Haygarth exposes the folly of the fashion for a certain rod of brass believed to conduct the healing power of "animal electricity," these poems regard the dominion of the imagination as something more than hocus-pocus.

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Among the handful of poems mentioned by name in the Advertisement to the first edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) is "Goody Blake and Harry Gill," said to rest on "a well-authenticated fact which happened in Warwickshire"—the only poem so documented. The implication seems to be that we dare not dismiss as unbelievable a record of events known to have occurred.

Endowed with the simplicity of a morality play, "Goody Blake and Harry Gill" draws on the physician Erasmus Darwin's account of a case in which an impoverished old woman, caught stealing firewood from a farmer's hedge one winter night, called down a curse of cold on her apprehender—in Wordsworth's rendition, "God! who art never out of hearing, / O may he never more be warm!" So deep an impression did this solemn prayer make on the farmer, mind and body, that an incurable chill possessed him from that moment. (In Darwin's version the farmer takes to his bed and huddles there for upwards of twenty years.) A hostile commentator or community might well judge the old woman a witch, but Wordsworth, like Darwin, will have none of that.

Seized by Harry Gill, who had been lying in wait for her despite the season, Goody Blake goes down on her knees in prayer, and in a turning of the tables her heartfelt words seize *him*: "Young Harry heard what she had said: / And icy cold he turned away." Though uttered on the spur of the moment when she is quite literally taken by surprise, Goody Blake's prayer is no improvisation but, to the contrary, a ritualized performance with centuries of tradition behind it. It belongs to the genre of the "beggar's curse": a plea for divine retribution uttered by the wronged poor (often on their knees, like Goody Blake), in accordance with deeply held communal norms. "It was above all the poor and the injured whose curses were believed likely to take effect. The legend of the Beggar's curse—the fateful malediction upon those who refused alms—enjoyed a continuous currency from the Dark Ages to the nineteenth century."[1] Though Darwin writes as a modern in casting the story of the cursed farmer as a parable of insanity, traditions as rooted and resonant as that of the beggar's curse were not to be scoffed

out of existence. Well might a prayer as powerful as Goody Blake's—a curse with the blessing of history—have captured the imagination, and thence the body, of Harry Gill.

In later editions of the *Lyrical Ballads* the original Advertisement grows into a full-fledged philosophical manifesto which at one point holds up the ballad of Goody Blake and Harry Gill as an illustration of the principle that "the power of the human imagination is sufficient to produce such changes even in our physical nature as might almost appear miraculous." Wordsworth could have cited a second, if less dramatic, instance of the same phenomenon in the *Lyrical Ballads*: the story of Susan Gale and her stunning recovery from a debilitating illness in "The Idiot Boy."

Where "Goody Blake and Harry Gill" is constructed back to front (with the farmer already wracked with cold as the poem begins), Wordsworth began "The Idiot Boy" with its last lines, then constructed the back-story leading up to them. The act that sets the tale in motion is Betty Foy's dispatch of her simple son Johnny—at night—to get the doctor for her neighbor Susan Gale, who lies grievously ill, it seems, with an unknown ailment. It is a gauge of Betty's concern for her friend that she would thus risk her child, who understands the directions to the doctor's house no more than the pony does. As the hours pass and he fails to appear, Betty finally tears herself from Susan even though she is "growing worse and worse," and searches desperately for Johnny, at last finding him. Meanwhile, however, Susan, also in a state of desperation, pulls herself out of bed and goes in search of the other two. In effect, the vividness of her fears for Betty and Johnny vivifies Susan herself, enabling her to shake off an illness so disabling that the boy had to be sent on his moonlight ride in the first place. In keeping with the poem's motif of lost and found and its unusual mood of arch levity, Susan

finds relief of her ills when she ceases to look for it. Could the doctor's presence at her bedside possibly have benefited her as much as his absence did?

If the story of Susan Gale bears out "the power of the human imagination," the imagination itself is by no means a faculty of delusion. When both Johnny and his mother fail to reappear by the approach of dawn and Susan suffers "many dreadful fears" on their behalf, her apprehensions are entirely sound. Under the circumstances, someone who did *not* dread that Johnny or Betty or both had come to grief would be morally wanting. (In point of fact, Johnny, when found, is near a waterfall that "thunders down with headlong force.") It is imagination that gives her such a lively feeling for the fortunes of these others. As if to establish that Susan Gale's imagination is an honorable faculty, the poem shows that her mental torment has everything to do with her recovery from a prostrating illness: "And as her mind grew worse and worse, / Her body it grew better." Like someone passing through a crisis, then, Susan Gale improves by deteriorating.

Though "The Idiot Boy" refers serio-comically to saints and goblins at various points, and though we're told that Susan rose from her bed "As if by magic cured," it's clear that her recovery comes about in the course of nature and not by magic or miracle. (To say that the power of imagination over the body "might almost appear miraculous" is not to say it *is* miraculous.) The chill that claims Harry Gill is surely be understood in the same way, as a fact of nature, not divine intervention or black magic. Both poems recount "changes in our physical nature" engendered somehow by the psyche, but the transformations run in opposite

directions, with Harry Gill descending (as noted) into a death-like state and Susan Gale returning to life.

Fittingly, it appears the term “psychosomatic” was coined by Wordsworth’s co-author, Coleridge.[2]

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[1] Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York: Scribner’s, 1971), p. 506.

[2] Coleridge’s is the first usage given in the OED, albeit in 1834.