

THE ROMANTICIST'S SUBLIMATION IN COTEMPORARY FICTION: A READING OF BAXTER'S "THE CLIFF"

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Abstract

This paper attempts to shed light on the reasons behind the revival of the superhuman element in contemporary fiction. It proceeds through an analytic and a comparative study of a contemporary short story called "The Cliff" with the English Romantic Writers. The analysis has discovered that this contemporary phenomenon could be a parody of the Romanticist's sublimation into Nature. Such an interpretation improves on the common reception of a contemporary literary phenomenon that critics has often overlooked or seen, at best, as a reaction against Realism and Naturalism.

In a story by a contemporary American writer an actual flight unaided by modern technological means takes place. The superhuman implications of this act come into question because of the setting of the story, its author's tone and attitude. The setting is a modern one, a California seashore with a motor vehicle on the spot. This modern setting, as it contrasts with medieval settings where supernatural events often unquestioningly occur, forces the reader to question the credibility of a superhuman occurrence in modern times. Faced with the author's serious tone and detached attitude, the reader's inquiry remains unsatisfied; the author's serious tone lends credibility to the superhuman act he describes and his detachment leaves the act of flight unexplained and unjustified. The reader is left with the necessity of having to believe what he cannot believe. It all happens in Charles Baxter's story "The Cliff."

The modern emphasis on the concept of art as an artifact or a game has caused the superhuman element in contemporary fiction to suffer from lack of explanation. Such concept has allowed critics either to overlook this element altogether or to accept its presence as part of the modern game of art. Maurice Beebe, for example, ignores this unusual phenomenon in the midst of his assertion that "many artists have found ways to show that for all . . . their, seemingly high aims toward the expression of truth and value, they are really engaged in an innocent and amusing game which ought not to be taken too seriously" (15). Similarly, Gabriel Josipvici argues in an early book of his that the modern writers "all stressed, in their art itself, that what they were creating were artifacts and not to be confused with life" (*World* 191).¹ And even when he raises the question in a later work, he finds his answer in Northrop Frye's explanation of a miraculous event in an ancient Egyptian tale: "This incident is no more a fictional episode than anything that has preceded it, nor is it less logically related than any other episode to the plot as a whole. But it has given up its external analogy to life" (*Lessons* 188).

Malcolm Bradbury breaks up with the common approach to this phenomenon when he traces its beginnings back to the sixties, a period that "saw a notable revival of surrealism and fantasy." He attributes this revival to two causes, a political as well as a literary one. Politically, it is the United States' military involvement in Vietnam that caused the revival to occur "as a need to react artistically against the horror and grossness of

the historical world.” The absence of direct reference to the war he explains by claiming that “gradually direct historical reference weakened and fiction sought to create its own liberated worlds of creative consciousness”(159). Such creation materialized in fantasy. A similar materialization Bradbury assumes to take place under the influence of the dominant literary mood, for he claims that the revival came as “a fundamental challenge to the past realism and naturalism in American fiction”(163). This challenge has permitted fantasy to find its way back to literature in contemporary fiction.

Despite its effort to be thorough, Bradbury’s explanation of the superhuman element in contemporary fiction remains narrow. Trapped on the historical line, he falls short of enlarging on the literary one. Hence, he manages to see the challenge to Realism and Naturalism in fiction and ignores the possibility of equal challenge to Romanticism. My reading of “The Cliff” intends to disclose this kind of challenge and to suggest that this story may be representative of the attitude of contemporary fiction dealing with superhuman events and situations.

However, the story does not lend this disclosure immediately. At first reading, it seems more of a physical re-enactment of the ecstatic psychological experience in which the Romantic poet transcends his inner world of self, its material surroundings, his consciousness of both and attains, in the meanwhile, a spiritual union with the Power that governs and controls the most eminent aspect of the universe, nature. This reading is suspected when the elderly man teaches the young boy how to fly by depending on the same elements that the Romantic poet usually invokes when questing transcendental union with Nature.² Before the actual flight, the old man in Baxter’s tale reminds the boy of what he has already taught him, the necessary components for flying: “Faith, hope, charity and love. . . . And the spells. . . you forget them, you die” (60). The spells are latter identified as “The sun! The ocean! The land! The sky! “ (62).

In his “Intimations of Immortality,” Wordsworth invokes the same elements when hoping to regain his past transcendental union with Nature, a union that was available in childhood yet has ceased to be so in adulthood. The Romantic poet’s invocation, however, takes a more detailed form than the old man’s. While the old man’s spells invoke the “land” without lingering on its different aspects, Wordsworth appeals to several of those aspects: “There was a time when meadow, grove and stream, / The earth, and every common sight, / To me did seem / Apparell’d in celestial light” (1-4). Similarly, the old man’s “sky” receives more elaboration in Wordsworth’s myth: “The Rainbow comes and goes, / AndThe Moon doth with delight / Look round her when the heavens are bare” (10-13). And above the old man’s appeal to the “sun,” Wordsworth towers to claim that the “sunshine is a glorious birth” (16). And even the old man’s invocation of the “ocean” is an echo of Wordsworth’s assertion that “Land and Sea / Give themselves up to jollity” (30-31).

However, while the old man’s invocation of the natural elements would allow the boy to fly, Wordsworth’s spiritual transcendence is inhibited by maturation: “Whither is fled the visionary gleam? / Where is it now, the glory and the dream?” (56-57). Therefore, Wordsworth has recourse now to moral, beside natural, elements. Significantly, those elements correspond to the rest of the components in the old man’s spells: “Faith, hope, charity and love”(60). Such correspondence enforces the suspicion that Baxter is emulating Wordsworth.

In compensation for his loss, Wordsworth, for example, has sought and found “Strength in what remains behind” (180). The elements of this “hopeful” future are “the primal sympathy / Which having been must ever be . . . the soothing thoughts that spring / Out of human suffering” and “the faith that looks through death” (181-85). While the correspondence of Wordsworth’s “charitable” feelings towards his fellow human beings and of his “faith” to the old man’s spells needs no elaboration, his concept of “primal sympathy” may require some. The “primal sympathy” is Wordsworth’s childhood love for and oneness with Nature, for his next prayer

runs as follows: "O, ye Fountains, Meadows, Hills and Groves, / Forebode not any severing of our loves" (186-87).³

The invocation of the natural world and the reliance on the previous moral elements for restoration of lost transcendental union with Nature, also exist in Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey." While lamenting his inability "to look on nature . . . as in the hour of thoughtless youth" (89-90), the poet continues to feel a "presence" that resides in "the light of setting suns . . . the round ocean" and "the blue sky" (94-99). He also finds "abundant recompense" in hearing "the still sad music of humanity" (88-91). The ability to hear such music comes only through love for his fellow human beings and sympathy with their afflictions.

The repetition of Wordsworth's invocation of the natural world and the moral elements in Baxter's tale indicates his intention to echo Wordsworth. Yet since he changes spiritual transcendence into physical flight, the echoing equally suggests an intention to secularize the Romantic experience. This latter intention seems to be also implicit in the play on the element of purity in the story. The old man instructs the boy: "You got to keep the body pure for the stuff we're doing" (59). This condition seems like a physical counterpart to Coleridge's claim in his "Dejection Ode" that "joy" was never "given / Save to the pure, and in their purest hour" (64-65). This joy that the Romantic poet dreams of is the "beauty- making power" in man (63), the ability to give nature love in order to receive its beauty and to achieve, through this reciprocal relationship, an organic oneness with the universe around.

Yet had the suggestion that Baxter is secularizing the Romantic experience been true, it would have created a conflict between the nature and the purpose of such secularization. While the purpose for the shift from the spiritual to the physical would be to fit the first to the palpable and material needs of the second, the procedure obviously involves a breach of the laws of materialism and realism through the act of flight. Because of this breach, the story cannot be a physical re-enactment of Romantic transcendence. For a correct interpretation of its meaning, an investigation of Baxter's attitude toward the Romantic poet's claims to transcendence in other stories becomes necessary.

In a story named "Surprised by Joy," Baxter indulges his protagonist in Romantic "joy."⁴ Jeremy attains "spiritual" oneness with Nature rather than mere physical flight into its elements. It all begins when this man and his wife lose their child through their own neglect and go on a runaway tour to a mountainous part of New Mexico seeking forgetfulness and consolation. Looking at the mountains, the sky and the clouds, Jeremy acts like a Romantic poet and experiences the same sense of sublimation that the Romantic poet feels in the presence of Nature. Wordsworth in "Tintern Abbey," for example, prays that his sister would retain her "primal" oneness with Nature. Such oneness takes, in Wordsworth's myth, the form of direct physical exposure to Nature's elements: "Therefore let the moon / Shine on thee in thy solitary walk; / And let the misty mountain winds be free / To blow against thee" (134-37). Similarly, Jeremy "separated himself" from his wife and was tilting his head toward the sky, letting the sun shine on his closed eyelids" (95).

The physical contact of both Jeremy and the Romantic poet with nature results in sublimation. Facing the Ravine of Arve in "Mont Blanc," Shelley writes: "Dizzy Ravine! and when I gaze on thee / I seem as in a trance sublime and strange" (34-35). And on looking at the landscape of Tintern Abbey, Wordsworth also feels "a sense sublime," that he identifies as a "motion and a spirit that impels / All thinking things, all objects of all thought / And rolls through all things" (95-103). Similarly, Jeremy experiences this sense of sublimation. Describing the physical manifestation of this feeling, his wife speaks of a "horrible smile appearing on his face," a face that remains, nevertheless, "radiant and calm" (94). Observing his sublimation, Harriet "took Jeremy's hand and scanned the clouds in the west, the Sangre de Cristo Mountains to the east, trying to see

the sky, the beckoning clouds the way he did, but she couldn't." All she "could see was the land stretched out in front of her. . . a few thunderheads and a narrow curtain of rain, so thin that the light passed straight through it" (95). In other words, Harriet merely succeeds in observing Nature's palpable existence and its physical activity. Her husband's sublimation and affinity with the Romantics remain beyond her attainment.

However, Jeremy's affinity with the Romantics is far from absolute. An essential difference between him and this group of poets emerges in the story. It lies in the psychological effect of Romantic transcendence on both. The immediate effect of this experience on the Romantic poet is freedom. On the other hand, speaking of his own sublimation, Jeremy emphasizes his entrapment. He envies his wife her freedom telling her: "You're free of it . . . I don't know how you did. You broke free. You're gone." (94).

Unlike Jeremy, the Romantic poet equates the desire for transcendence with a certain quest for freedom. Coleridge, in his "Dejection Ode," envisions it as a sending of his "soul broad"(18). His inability to relieve his soul from its human consciousness is a "stifled" grief that "finds no natural outlet, no relief, / In word, or sigh, or tear"(23-24). On the other hand, the capacity to set the soul free from the shackles of inner life and consciousness is "joy" that Coleridge describes in images of flowingness: "Joy is the sweet voice, Joy the luminous cloud" (71). Nothing could move more freely than a sweet voice and a luminous cloud. To this state of total freedom Coleridge aspires to send his soul.

Similarly, Wordsworth speaks of his recollection of the "beauteous forms" of Nature in "Tintern Abbey" as a liberating experience:

In which the burthen of the mystery
In which the heavy and weary weight
Of all this unintelligible world,
Is lightened. (38-41)

On the other hand, Baxter transforms the Romantic poet's liberation from consciousness into an intensification of consciousness. Describing his protagonist's psychological entrapment, Baxter writes: "In the midst of the sunlight he was hugging his darkness" (95). To his wife's anticipation of a quick termination of his crisis, Jeremy responds: "I don't want to be all right. . . . It's my pleasure not to be all right"(94). This reversal of the psychological effect of Romantic transcendence indicates that Baxter is re-evaluating such an experience and reconsidering its results. Indeed, he allows his protagonist to indulge in Romantic joy only to undermine the Romantic poet's claims to sublimation. In this light, Jeremy's indulgence in joy seems deliberately ironic. Other stories of Baxter support this claim.

His story "The Eleventh Floor" ironically subverts the Romantic myth of spiritual transcendence through a subtle undermining of the Romantic idealization of nature. The story revolves around a writer of commercial ads who lives on the eleventh floor of a building in one of the big, crowded American cities and who, despite his thorough entrapment in urban life, is powerfully obsessed with the English Romantic writers. The story also involves his son Eric who takes a more extreme stand of departing to the northern woods of a mountainous area away from the crowded city. Baxter's handling of their two cases enforces the suspicion that his surface embracing of Romantic ideals actually conceals an ironic undermining of their validity.

In Bradbury's case, Baxter's disavowal of the Romantic myth is implicit in the subtle exposure of the tension his protagonist experiences through his obsession with the Romantics. Bradbury's tension is evident in his inability to be comfortable with his wish to emulate the Romantics. It happens once, while rowboating down the pond of the city park, that he "with his right index finger began absent-mindedly to write his name on the pond's pale-green surface. When he realized what he was doing, he started to laugh" (150). His laughter

comes as a reaction to a sudden realization that he cannot be another Keats whose final request was a desire for absorption into nature. "Here lies one whose name was writ in water" is the phrase that Keats requested to be inscribed on his tombstone (Perkins 1115). Bradbury's strong obsession with Keats, evident in his keeping of Keats's volume of poetry in a handy position of his desk, is inhibited.

The inhibition is caused by Bradbury's consciousness of the sense of incompatibility between his desire to emulate the Romantic obsession with Nature and the modern conditions of his daily life, where such desire expects to find fulfillment. This consciousness takes the form of a sarcastic tone that often accompanies Bradbury's expression of attraction to Romantic thinking. His attraction to Blake's advocacy of natural love in the "London" poem, for instance, is inhibited by Bradbury's consciousness that his eleventh-floor habitation is not a fit place for a Romantic approach to life. Therefore, he releases his admiration in an ironic tone: "You can't hear the harlot's cry from street to street up here, more's the pity. I look down on it all from a great height. I have an eleventh-floor view of things" (153).

The same kind of tension governs Bradbury's response to his son's desire to depart to the northern woods "to get away from college and the city" and from "his father's dinner table, apartment and the view outside the eleventh floor" (146). The prospect of "living in cabins and searching the soul" Bradbury considers "a rustication" and responds to it with inhibited admiration. Sarcastically, he questions his son's desire to rusticate: "who've you been reading, Thoreausky?" (147). And on the son's return from the woods, the father echoes Coleridge: "Did you from outward forms win the passion and the life whose fountains are within?" (155). This sarcasm comes in Bradbury's strife to control his fascination with his son's Romantic withdrawal to nature, for about the prospect he cannot help admitting "frankly, I think it's a great idea" (147).

Such control becomes even more necessary because Bradbury realizes that there are sides to Romantic ideology that urban life can neither accept nor digest. His son's desire to marry the rustic girl who accompanied him from the northern woods discloses Bradbury's reservation: "Oh, I get it. You went up north looking for nature and you found it, and you brought it back, and there it, I mean she, is. Overbite, straight hair, chapped hands . . . and all." Bradbury responds to the girl's naturalness with urban sophistication and sarcasm. Her spontaneity and generous capacity to love selflessly do not induce him to surmount his prejudice, for he responds to his son's attempt to make him do so with: "God, you're Romantic. It must be your age" (158). The gap between the Romanticist's nature ideology and modern values remains unbridgeable in Bradbury's mind. Neither seems fit for the other. The Romantic idealization of nature cannot be easily realized in modern atmospheres, nor would such idealization, if realized, be suitable for modern lifestyles.

Baxter's double undermining of the Romantic faith in Nature, is enforced from another source in the story, Bradbury's son Eric and his Romantic desire to escape civilization into a presumably uncorrupted part of the natural world. Eric serves to deflate the Romantic trust in nature through his innocent and blind faith in the efficiency of the relationship between man and Nature. Baxter shows Eric's faith as groundless through the girl who is supposed to embody the Romantic ideal of naturalness. Rather than embracing this ideal, Darlene resists it. To the principle of rustication she responds: "you wouldn't believe all the city people who come up north to commune with nature. . . . I don't understand people sleeping on the ground. Who wants that when you can shower in a bathroom and sleep in a bed and look out from the eleventh floor? Not me" (155). Though she carries the stamp of rusticity, the girl rejects rustic life and opens up for civilization. Her attitude ironically deflates Eric's desire to rusticate, for it proves that there is nothing like pure nature that he can turn to. His father's resistance of the Romantic idealization of nature, despite the powerful tension it undergoes, proves to be more reasonable than Eric's blind confidence in nature's effectiveness. Nevertheless, both father and son's attitude accomplish the same goal of overthrowing Nature's ideology in Romantic poetry, not through

open attack, but rather through ironic disclosure of the distance between its protestations and the values of modern life.

This message of "The Eleventh Floor," placed side by side to Jeremy's alleged act of sublimation in "Surprised by Joy," resolves my earlier problematic reading of "The Cliff." The ironic undermining of Romantic transcendence in both stories places the boy's act of physical flight in a context different from that of my earlier reading. The boy's flight ceases, under their influence, to be a physical re-enactment of the Romantic act of spiritual sublimation into nature and becomes another ironic subversion of Nature's ideology as recorded in Romantic poetry. Indeed, there are elements in the story that support this alternate reading of "The Cliff."

The story, for example, ironically plays on the element of purity by asserting and simultaneously denying its importance for accomplishing the act of physical flight. The old man instructs the boy "to keep the body pure" from cigarette smoking "for the stuff" they are doing, while he himself does not adhere to this principle; the boy observes: "You don't keep it pure." To this charge the old man responds: "I don't have to. It's been pure. And, like I say, nobody is ever pure twice" (59). The old man's negation of a principle he just avowed discloses an ironic play on that principle and a subtle undermining of the purpose for which it is introduced, namely the act of flight.

Significantly, the old man's denial comes in direct opposition to Coleridge's implicit avowal, in his "Dejection Ode," that "joy" is a recurrent fit that depends on a recurrent state of spiritual purity: "joy that ne'er was given, / Save to the pure and in their purest hour" (64-65). This hour of purity comes and goes because "each visitation" of "afflictions . . . Suspends," but does not terminate, the poet's joy or "Shaping spirit of imagination" (82-86). The old man's negation of the Coleridgean principle of recurrent purity occurs in spite of an initial adoption of that principle (for the old man has seemingly transformed Coleridge's spiritual purity into a physical one and avowed its necessity for the boy's flight). The opposition to Coleridge now is another ironic play on the element of purity and another undermining of the purpose for which the poet has introduced it, namely the act of transcendence. Therefore, when the act of physical flight virtually occurs (despite the ironic undermining of the professed condition for its occurrence) it becomes, like Jeremy's sublimation, another ironic deflation of the Romanticist's spiritual flight (his act of transcendence) not an adaptation of its essence to the palpable needs of materialism.

This ironic deflation of the Romantic idealization of nature and of the Romantic poet's transcendence into what has been, indeed, implicit in the reductive treatment that Nature receives in the story. The old man's initial invocation of the "sun," the "ocean," the "land" and the "sky" lacks Wordsworth's elaboration essentially because it lacks his infatuation with Nature. The old man calls Nature's elements the "spells." This appellation indicates that the Romantic poet's adoration of nature becomes, in the old man's mouth, a mere cold, mechanical ritual. Baxter allows his protagonist to invoke Nature in order to repeal the Romantic poet's protestations about its powers in generating his own transcendence. Therefore, when the flight actually occurs, despite this other undermining of the means of its occurrence, it becomes, like Jeremy's sublimation, an act of irony against Romantic transcendence. The superhuman element in contemporary fiction can become a parody, not only of Realism and Naturalism, but also of Romanticism.

Baxter's ironic subversion of Romantic ideology, despite his alleged embracing of its protestations, belongs to the larger cultural, intellectual and literary movement called postmodernism. In one of the most illuminating assessments of this movement, Linda Hutcheon asserts that postmodernism is characterized by a revived interest in the literature of the past, an interest that takes a "critical" rather than a "nostalgic" form. Hutcheon says: "When Eliot recalled Dante or Virgil in *The Waste Land*, one sensed a kind of wishful call to continuity." This nostalgic attitude of the modernist, Hutcheon asserts, is "contested" by the postmodernist for whom the

return to the past involves an “ironic discontinuity . . . at the heart of continuity.” This critical treatment of the past becomes largely possible through “Parody,” a device that “paradoxically both incorporates and challenges that which it parodies” (11). Hence, postmodern thinking can “subvert . . . through irony not rejection” many aspects of the literature of the past including “the humanist assumption of a unified self and an integrated consciousness” (xii). Both parody and ironic subversion as employed by postmodern writers are reminiscent of Baxter’s maneuver towards Romanticism. On the other hand, the postmodern challenge to humanist thinking may shed further light on Baxter’s reasons for wishing to overthrow Nature’s ideology in Romantic poetry. His reasons may not only be the sense of incompatibility between Romantic protestations and contemporary values, but also a disagreement with the Romantics over the principle of the integrated self implied in their confident assertion of the possibility of transcendence. In any event, if Baxter’s ironic subversion of Romantic thinking may be assigned a place in postmodernism, then other supernatural events in contemporary fiction may be submitted to the same rationale and linked to the same phenomenon. And in conclusion, it would be fit to assert that the superhuman element in contemporary writings can go beyond its reactionary attitude toward Realism, Naturalism and military violence and become a reaction against the optimism of Romantic thinking. It can also transcend the limitation of spontaneity implied in the “liberated world of creative consciousness” and become an act of deliberation on the part of the “creative consciousness” (Bradbury 159).

Notes

¹ See for more examples Federman’s book and specifically his essay “Surfiction: Four Propositions in Form of an Introduction.”

² In my capitalization of nature I follow Perkins' reading of Wordsworth: "When Wordsworth speaks of Nature, he involves: (1) external nature; (2) all existence, a harmonious, integrated, and living whole; (3) a "Presence" or Divine Life that informs the whole and every part" (209).

³ Although my reading of Wordsworth is generally influenced by Harold Bloom, I differ from him over his reading of "Primal sympathy," partly because it would make Wordsworth sound unnecessarily repetitive when he speaks of "the soothing thoughts that spring / Out of human suffering," and partly because it tends to overlook the connotation of the word "primal." My reading, while taking these two matters into consideration, does not exclude Bloom's reading but changes its chronological order in Wordsworth's myth.

⁴ Wordsworth's elegy over the death of a beloved has the same title: "Surprised by Joy."

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