

Burying and Praising the Minor Romantic: the Case of George

Darley¹

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In ‘Elegy for minor poets’ Louis MacNeice commemorates the unnamed and forgotten authors whose existence provides an important contrast with the greater achievements of the canon:

For if not in the same way, they fingered the same language

According to their lights. For them as for us

Chance was a coryphaeus² who could be either

An angel or an *ignus fatuus* [*sic*].

Let us keep our mind open, our fingers crossed;

Some who go dancing through dark bogs are lost.³

¹ An earlier version of this article was presented as a paper at the conference ‘Romantic Reputations’, University of Bristol, October 1996.

² (The leader of a chorus.)

³ Louis MacNeice, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1979) p. 232 (dated 1946). Later stanzas allude to ‘the spirit’s / Hayfever’, and the lameness of the minor poets, both associations of personal affliction that seem most appropriate to George Darley. The phrase ‘Their ghosts are gagged’ even comes close to an explicit allusion to the stammer from which Darley suffered throughout his life, and – by implication – the

'Minor' poets should be given their due, since they experienced the same environment, and contended with the same materials as those who are now still remembered. It is implied that the valiant failure of a minor is a more plausible object of sympathy for most readers than the 'success' or 'greatness' of the canon. Although MacNeice's poem is warm and humane in tone, there is a sense that the principal attraction of minor writing is that it performs a useful role in the upkeep of 'great' writing. The poem does not call into question covertly operating criteria of taste, but enacts what appears to be a sentimental attraction to the strayed and fallen. A wistful lament for those who somehow didn't make it, the poem conservatively suggests that the effect of reading minors will be to send us back to the majors with renewed humility. The poem therefore engages with some of the ironies of periodisation: wide reading in minor literature should deepen and diversify the sense of a literary period, but in fact is more likely to be subordinated to the pre-existing sense of period, and be exploited to re-validate established patterns. MacNeice's 'elegy' dramatises the significant role of minority and marginality in the circular validations of period and genre; it seems that any given category of literature *is* still defined primarily in terms of the canonical few. By presenting itself as an occasional piece, an excursion into the poetic margin, the poem ironically encompasses this ambivalence.

alleged textual inarticulacy which it reflected, a theme which has long been convenient confirmation of his minor status. I am grateful to George Hughes for bringing this poem to my attention.

It is significant that MacNeice chooses not to identify individual authors in his (consequently rather muted) tribute; this is more, perhaps, than a gesture of courtesy ('it would be rude to name names'). Marking out a poet within the paradigm of Minor in Need of Rescue will certainly have the effect of reinforcing his/her minor status. This cycle of praise and burial has been playing out for many years in the case of the 'minor' Romantic poet George Darley. An examination of the critical patterns which have sustained the general neglect of Darley, his role as an occasional foil to canonical, 'masculine' Romanticism, may assist a general understanding of covert aspects of the maintenance of Romantic period and genre.

A case study in the workings of canonicity and reputation, this article will therefore attempt to examine the persistence of critical apology and its relation to obscurity with special reference to Romantic authors, using the example of the poet George Darley. A critique of some memorial-style evaluations of the poet, and some examples of modern critical response in terms of the construction and maintenance of minor status will be followed by a reading experiment in which I will consider the implications for Darley's reputation of a re-reading of the vision-quest poem *Nepenthe* in the context of the medical science of his period. My account of Darley's reputation does not concern how 'good' or 'bad' a poet he is, which is another story altogether, but aims to demonstrate that there remain in recent critical readings certain old habits which can be traced back to the days in which his reputation was first designated minor or marginal, that certain recurrent gestures may be recognised in the writing about Darley as 'a minor'. The specific case of Darley is offered in the hope of further stimulating debate about more general issues connected with the changing canons of Romantic

literature. How are we to speak of a minor Romantic poet, and is a minor Romantic a special case? Should we be aiming to eradicate the element of apology or praise, recognising it as an uncritical encumbrance, and if so how? Or, would this cleansing actually involve some sacrifice, in view of the still privileged Romantic myth of neglected genius? Do we still need neglect and neglected authors sufficiently to decline to interrogate a recurring cycle of condescension, even as canons are now supposedly in a deconstructed state of mobility and sensation?⁴

The principal tradition of writing on George Darley's poetry considers it as very near to indistinguishable from George Darley's reputation. First I should like briefly to consider some accounts of the poet which may be symptomatic of this tendency. R.A. Streatfield, in the article 'A Forgotten Poet: George Darley' (1902) attached the designation 'minor' to Darley firmly and indelibly, while also championing his cause, and concluding with

⁴ There is currently widespread concern that selective liberal expansion of the canon into certain previously marginalised fields is being offered in place of more thoroughgoing scrutiny. See Susan Wolfson, 'Anthologizing Romantic-Era Writing for the Commercial Market: An Introduction to a Public Discussion'; Adriana Craciun, 'Women Romantic Writers of the Romantic Period: New Anthologies and Resources'; and Laura Mandell, 'Canons Die Hard: A Review of New Romantic Anthologies (*Romanticism on the Net*, 1997, 1998 and 1998 respectively). Some of the most interesting and open discussion has been published on the Internet.

hopes for a resurrection in the deferred and indefinite future.⁵ Ramsay Colles's *Complete Poetical Works* appeared in 1908;⁶ Claude Colleer Abbott's *Life and Letters* in 1928;⁷ and a short critical essay by Robert Bridges in 1930.⁸ In 1950 A.J. Leventhal gave a lecture on the poet at his former institution Trinity College, Dublin, later published as *George Darley (1795-1846): A Memorial Discourse*, which is a fascinating user's guide to critical apology, its strategies and implications. Leventhal is giving a memorial lecture at Trinity – traditionally in praise of a TCD alumnus – and admits to a local partisan preference. He makes several gestures which are typical of and necessary to the maintenance of a minor reputation. Most important is that the critic be seen to be beginning a reconstitution without becoming committed to pursuing a long campaign; the tone is one of respectful deference and deferment. Other important ingredients include mention of the poet's promise and disadvantage, early or occasional praise by certain worthies (Carlyle, Lamb and Tennyson in this case), subsequent neglect, and the integrity of the author when compared with those less deserving but later more favoured

⁵ R.A. Streatfield, 'A Forgotten Poet: George Darley', *Quarterly Review*, 196 (1902), 176-78.

⁶ *The Complete Poetical Works of George Darley*, ed. Ramsay Colles (London: Routledge; New York: Dutton, 1908) (The Muses' Library edition).

⁷ Claude Colleer Abbott, *The Life and Letters of George Darley, Poet and Critic* (London: Oxford University Press, Humphrey Milford, 1928).

⁸ Robert Bridges, 'George Darley', in *Collected Essays, Papers &c.* (London: Oxford University Press, Humphrey Milford, 1930), pp. 187-88.

with fame. And a measure of self-reproach or self-destruction in the author is especially valuable:

Darley is all too little known in these islands although several efforts have been made to re-awaken interest in him. “Re-awaken” is the *mot juste* for in his lifetime he was much praised [...]

Darley was particularly unfortunate. Solitary, introspective, he felt keenly his lack of success with the general public and took shy refuge in anonymity and pseudonymity in much of his published work.⁹

Leventhal goes on to consider the bad stammer from which Darley suffered, not only mentioning the evident pain it caused him, to which Darley explicitly refers, but speculating further that his fear of a *viva voce* interrogation was the reason why he never attempted to become a ‘fellow by examination’.

The libraries of the world are filled with the works of defunct authors. Many are irretrievably dead, but now and again we may stumble on some who have unjustly fallen into oblivion. George Darley was such a one and it does not require local patriotism as an impulse to bring him to public purpose. He failed because he was before his time. But now, one

⁹ A.J. Leventhal, *George Darley (1795-1846): A Memorial Discourse* (Dublin: Dublin University Press, 1950), p. 4.

hundred years after his death, his verse – particularly in *Nepenthe* – is in tune with some of the best poetry of modern times.¹⁰

What the best poetry of modern times consisted of, is left unspecified, although some scathing hints are cast at the popular cults of T.S. Eliot and Dylan Thomas, so Leventhal's criteria of taste are to an extent negatively defined. Darley then is 'ahead of his time' in a rather indeterminate way, in which the seed of Victorian style which he represents is brought forward to meet a backward-looking post-war standard of taste. The following is a final symptomatic phrase from this essay:

After some twenty years of absence from Ireland, during which time he managed to make the grand tour in Europe, writing articles on art for the *Athenaeum* which might profitably be collected...¹¹

These articles are of course profitably collected in the conditional, in the indefinite future, and by someone else. If ever there were a half-hearted rescue attempt, this is it; for all the critic's protests about Darley's undoubted talents, there seems little at stake in this notably relaxed address. The more Darley is raised, the deeper he sinks by implication. The example of Leventhal illustrates what appears to be a recurring model of critical apology, in which an 'unjustly neglected' minor is praised and lamented, but

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 17.

¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 15.

in which there is a decidedly half-hearted attempt at resuscitation. This is an extreme example, but there are signs that more recent literary criticism indirectly perpetuates this trick, of actually maintaining a cycle of disinterment and re-interment while appearing to break it.

The critic Ian Jack, however, is a forthright contrast to this, in his unembarrassed qualitative judgements. In 1963 Jack included a characteristically spirited account of Darley in *The Oxford History of English Literature*, remarking that ‘we notice a contrast between the unusual clarity of his critical insight and his apparent inability to profit from his own understanding.’¹² Jack writes of that ‘dismal failure’ the visionary poem *Nepenthe*

It is curious that a man with a stutter should have produced such a work, unfinished and in an exceptionally unattractive format: as if he were resigned to the perpetual impossibility of communication.¹³

Jack has disposed of *Nepenthe* with a few well aimed quotations, in the name of a presumed and unquestioned standard of taste. The blatancy of his opinions is quite disarming, making him pound for pound one of Darley’s most interesting critics. However, one interesting feature of the quotation above is its suggestion that the poet is

¹² *English Literature 1815-1832 (The Oxford History of English Literature)* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), p. 144.

¹³ *ibid.*, pp. 144 and 145.

in some way acquiescent, and therefore complicit with the history of neglect. The patterns of blocked communication can be read in a kind of fractal correspondence between the minor poet's failure to find an enduring audience, the florid overwritten quality of his 'gloriously ridiculous lines', and his physical speech impediment. The narrative of frustrated speech is duplicated on various different scales.

Why have a score of years not established my title with the world? Why did not "Sylvia," with all its faults, ten years since? It ranked me among the *small* poets. I had as soon be ranked among the piping bullfinches.¹⁴

This quotation begins Leslie Brisman's article 'George Darley: The Poet as Pigmy' (1976), which makes an argument for a myth of smallness and weakness in some of the poet's texts, reading certain aspects of *Thomas à Becket*, 'Pedro Ladron, or the Shepherd of Toppledown Hill' (a tale from *The Labours of Idleness*) and *Nepenthe* as symbolically encoded negotiations with minor status.¹⁵ Brisman interprets the poet's gradually maturing discoveries of dwarfishness and diminution as an ultimately benign strategy of negotiating a truce with the overshadowing and emasculating force of giant

¹⁴ Letter to Bryan Waller Procter, 1840; quoted in Leslie Brisman, 'George Darley: The Poet as Pigmy', *Studies in Romanticism*, 15 (1976), 119-41 (p. 119).

¹⁵ Brisman later amplified this argument in *Romantic Origins* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1978).

antiquity and strong modern forebears; the poet is then said to find a consolatory stability in the acquiescent decline into minor powers and minor reputation.

Brisman decodes a putative ‘myth of weakness’, for example, in the diminutive stature of the storyteller Pedro; Pedro conceals himself behind a boulder which leaves a gap for ingress and egress which he is small enough to exploit, but through which the giant vultures pursuing him will not fit. Brisman’s is a sophisticated argument in that it distinguishes between various forms of encounter between great and small; but it lapses sometimes into quite relaxed transfer from biographical circumstances to supposed encoded strategies in the texts – using symbolism rather crudely, while it is the obscurity and involution of Darley’s symbolism that gives it much of its energy. This is a narrative, and it is ultimately a happy story; it has a happy ending. A small poet of limited powers contends in vain for a time with the (explicitly Bloomian) challenge of greatness, before retiring gracefully to content himself with a comfortable habitation in the Romantic marginalia.

When Darley concludes the paragraph with pedestrian doubt, “Again, I say, this may have been a dream,” he closes the *little* vision as Keats closes a *major* ode – but with no grand tension locked in. The vision *insists* on remaining minor, and thus all the more *essentially about minority*.¹⁶ [my emphases]

¹⁶ Brisman, p. 123.

Brisman's narrative would have it that the minor Romantic speaks directly to us of his minor status, the final indignity.

The following quotation begins Mark Storey's article 'George Darley: the Burial of the Self' (1980):

I am the living personification of those ridiculous characters which people the works of the novelist & satyrist, those ludicrous yet melancholy pictures of literary obscurity [...] tho I sing like a dying swan no one would hear me.¹⁷

Although more biographical and elegiac in nature, Storey's article assents to and confirms the basic method we have observed in Brisman, returning time and again to the ideas of poetic defeat and failed aspiration to poetic reputation – both of these apparently being free-standing and self-explanatory qualities. While all quotation in short studies must be acknowledged to be selective, Storey's quotations in prose and verse exceed the needs and limits of persuasiveness, by lighting on the language of sinking, descent and burial to the extent of over-emphasis. A gloomy tautology is constructed, in which we expect Darley to be weak and minor, and find in his works only the materials of weakness and minority. Darley can of course support this

¹⁷ Letter to Mary Russell Mitford, 1836; quoted in Mark Storey, 'George Darley: the Burial of the Self', *Keats-Shelley Memorial Association Bulletin*, 31 (1980), 22-38 (p. 22).

pessimistic reading of sinking and burial with plentiful quotations, just as he provides smallness and weakness aplenty for Brisman's more searching analysis but similarly insistent tautology. Any writer can be made to provide the vocabulary of his/her own particular manner of defeat: so Keats might provide instances of dissolution, Byron obliteration, or Clare concealment. Storey's article surrenders readily, out of apparently low esteem for Darley's writing, to this cycle of raising and new burial, even while observing the cycle's workings clearly enough in some critical remarks about the inflated claims with which Anne Ridler prefaced her 1979 *Selected Poems* (in comparisons with Hopkins and Tennyson).¹⁸ Again there is an easeful, too-easy transfer between tragic life and languishing text.

There seems to be considerable continuity between the memorial-style evaluations of the early twentieth century and these examples of recent criticism. It is also possible to recognise a strong element of collusion with this stagnation in modern critical readings, in which a cycle is perpetuated; and even a critic who acknowledges the cycle will be unmoved to try to break it. Because readings are infrequent by definition in the case of a minor poet, usually interspersed by some years, 'reassessments' – in their anxiety to justify their own practice – fail to contextualise freshly or fully; and all too often what is recovered or rescued in a 'reassessment' is not the poet or the text but merely the reputation, not much changed, although lightly filtered through the contemporary critical idioms. This is what I shall call the tautological cycle of praise as new burial, a burial no less certain for being beneath

¹⁸ *Selected Poems of George Darley*, ed. Anne Ridler (London: Merrion, 1979).

strata of changing methodological practice. The method and the argument are entirely circular. The minor poet is examined for clues that will explain minor status. S/he is found to exhibit minor symptoms, to invite and construct a minor reputation. The alleged gestures of humility, embedded in the text, confirm the marginal status which prompted the search in the first place. Perhaps the most telling symptom of this continuing, intermittent process is the unrigorous use of biographical material. Nothing in an author's life is so easy to prove opportunistically, or at least tersely, as frustration. And the blunt searching for 'success' or 'failure' in writing will inevitably lead back to the biography.

In the case of Darley, the stammer is invariably, eagerly made much of. Jack, as we have seen, suggests a psychological link between Darley's stammer and the half-hearted and heterodox communication failure of *Nepenthe*. Here is one example from Brisman: 'Pedro is seen threatened [...] by the appearance of a rival storyteller. *If* the rival could be said to represent Darley's conscious fear that his speech impediment would make him lose audience [my emphasis]...' ¹⁹. The symbolic equivalence here is first floated as a suggestion, then accepted and taken for granted. And one example from Storey: 'his stammer and almost perpetual, grinding headaches were the symptoms of his inner malaise.'²⁰ An 'inner malaise' is nebulous and unquantifiable, and the phrase is another signal that modern criticism is upholding rather than challenging a sentimental myth of neglect. But in addition to this, a chronic stammer and severe

¹⁹ Brisman, pp. 124-25.

²⁰ Storey, p. 25.

headaches are painful and unpleasant in themselves, and prolonged pain has consequences for any writer; it does not have to be a metaphor for some vague spiritual unease to be of some significance. If we are interested in the biography, we should have a better sense of its provenance and limits as a critical resource. What are we to make of Darley's stammer? Could it be that this painful lifelong frustration in speech, and sense of social unacceptability, are exorcised in the poems as an over-articulate, golden-tongued eloquence? Darley's lyrical smoothness might then be read ironically as evidence of his inarticulate and depressed self-absorption... What I mean to demonstrate here is that opportunistic theories can be improvised on the spot: the effects of the poet's stammer could be traced in either smooth or broken utterance, or even both. If we are unable to treat the subject of Darley's speech impediment with greater seriousness, perhaps the matter should be set aside completely.

Bearing in mind what we have seen of the resilience of minor status and biographical myth, let us attempt a reading of the long visionary poem *Nepenthe* (1835). This strange poem was printed and circulated by Darley with apparent contempt for a wide readership: the original edition is a shabby, deliberately unprepossessing object – no title page, no author's name, the cantos unnumbered, the pagination incorrect, scruffy typography, and bound between two pieces of limp brown paper. And this of course was at a time when annuals and gift books were becoming increasingly handsome and lavish. It seems an intentional affront to the idea of canonical status, or even of being widely read, and yet makes an aggressive inverted claim to quality. To clothe a transcendental and ornate vision in rags asserts an otherworldly illumination for its

contents, both as a high-Romantic gesture and as a negative stab at canonicity. The unfinished poem *Nepenthe* narrates the dreamer-poet's search for a universal panacea and his fluctuating fortunes, as he is swept through exotic land- and sky-scapes on waves of intoxication. This is how Darley describes its intended structure:

In short, the key to my whole poem is this—to show the folly of discontent with the natural tone of human life. Canto I means to shew the deleterious effects of ultra-natural joy, tho' imbibed from heaven itself; Canto II, those of ultra-natural melancholy, imbibed from the regions whose comfort is darkness & consolation bewailment. I must acknowledge that both developments are imperfect in these fragmentary Cantos—great part especially of the second object has to be worked out in Canto III—which will also conclude with exhibiting the advantageous results of the mingled joy and melancholy, imbibed from the native fountain of humanity.²¹

Canto III was to remain unwritten. Critical opinion is divided as to whether this is fortunate or unfortunate, but has agreed that the design and the realisation failed somehow. It is worth noting here that Darley's three conditions of mind are each said to be 'imbibed' from a particular source; the repetition of this word suggests not only a quest for spiritual equilibrium, but also a significant interest in the manner of influx from the source, whether poisonous or medicinal. The prominent sensation of thirst in

²¹ Letter to Milnes; Abbott, p. 125.

the poem gradually develops into a symbolism of pathology and treatment. The following lines are from the moment in the first canto when the dreamer imbibes some of the blood of the dying and soon-to-rise Phoenix:

—My burning soul one drop did quaff—
Heaven reeled and gave a thunder-laugh!
Earth reeled, as if with pendulous swing
She rose each side thro' half her ring,
That I, head downward, twice uphurled,
Saw twice the deep blue underworld,
Twice, at one glance, beneath me lie
The bottomless, boundless, void sky!
Tho' inland far, me seemed around
Ocean came on with swallowing sound
Like moving mountains serried high!
Methought a thousand daystars burned
By their mere fury as they turned,
Bewildering heaven with too much bright,
Till day looked like a daylight night.
Brief chaos, only of the brain!
Heaven settled on its poles again,

And all stood still, but dizzily.²²

The drug turns his sense inside out and upside down, collapsing the proportion and structure of the world. The pounding of blood in his temples becomes the ocean, as he experiences the projection of his body's turmoil onto the natural world. Much of the first canto proceeds at this hectic and euphoric pace, as the poet experiences successive waves of intoxication and vision, each engulfing the last, and periodically falls into unconsciousness. He expresses impatience with the ground and sea, and all flat surfaces, giving vent to a hysterical succession of invocations to powers that will raise him higher, rapt to heaven upon heaven, until he crashes. Pursued by bloodthirsty Furies, he needs to descend, eventually choosing extinction by drowning rather than be torn apart; the poet becomes Icarus and embraces the sluggish sea.

Darley wrote to Allan Cunningham, who had complained of the lack of human interest in all this

Every milliner (he or she) can scribble greensick verses about love and melancholy and sentiment skin-deep, but I defy them to affect imagination, which is at least as principal an attribute of poetry as feeling. You have said on other occasions that I was not wholly *deficient* in this latter—but I do not, or rather can not, find in it enough of *excitement*. My mind is

²² Quoted from the first edn, which has no line numbers (ll. 216-33 in *Selected Poems*).

sluggish by nature, liable to deep and long collapses, from which it is roused only by *stimulants* [my emphases].²³

This was written in 1835. Intriguingly, frustratingly, it is not clear what kind of stimulants are in question here; chemical stimulants seem likely, but non-chemical (metaphorical) ones are also quite possible. In this account of the unsteady upkeep of his poetic powers Darley is using the terminology of Romantic pathology: a partial deficiency in him causes sluggish collapse, and he needs to rouse himself by administering an appropriate stimulant. The word ‘excitement’ was a favoured term of the medical system proposed by Dr John Brown in *The Elements of Medicine* (1795); Brunonian medical theory was widely practised from the turn of the nineteenth century, being circulated in both its authentic texts and in diluted pirate copies.²⁴ John Brown held that healthy life consisted in the balance between excitement and excitability, which are inversely proportional. Too much or too little of either is unhealthy and eventually fatal. Diminished excitement creates ‘direct debility’ and requires a systematic treatment with stimulants; greatly increased excitement produces ‘indirect debility’ – the point at which the body loses its sensitivity to stimuli due to over-indulgence. In this case the patient’s intake of stimulants (chemical, physical or mental)

²³ Letter to Cunningham, 8 July 1835; Abbott, pp. 123-24.

²⁴ There were various medical systems in the early nineteenth century which justified the use of opiates, but Brown’s was probably the most prevalent and the best known; it was also associated with the charge of encouraging intemperance.

must be lowered in a controlled descent back into a state of potential excitability. Some extracts from Brown may be useful to demonstrate the relevance of this theory of pathology to the patterns of violent over-stimulus and botched cure in Darley's poem. The following quotations also show that Brown presents his pioneering demotic medicine in a lively prose style which leavens technicality with comedy:

When the excitability is wasted by any one stimulus, there is still a reserve capable of being acted upon by another. Thus a person, who has dined fully, or is fatigued in body, or tired with intellectual exertion, and therefore has a disposition to sleep, will be refreshed by strong liquors; and, when these have produced the same sleepiness, the more diffusable stimulus of opium will arouse him [...] Even after opium fails, and leaves him heavy and oppressed, a stimulus still higher and more diffusable, if there be any such, will have the same effect. A person fatigued with a journey will be roused by music to dance or skip; and he will be enabled to run after a flying beauty, if she fly so as to leave him some hopes of overtaking her.²⁵

²⁵ *The Elements of Medicine of John Brown, M.D., translated from the Latin, with comments and illustrations, by the Author [...]*, 2 vols (London: J. Johnson, 1795), pp. 18-20.

This shows the continuity between physical and mental stimulus. The following quotation describes the importance of balance and counteraction:

The defect of any one stimulus, and the proportional abundance of excitability are for the time, compensated by any other stimulus, and often with great advantage to the system. So a person, who has dined insufficiently, and therefore has not been well enough stimulated, is refreshed by a piece of good news. Or, if during the course of the day, he has not been sufficiently invigorated by the stimulant operation of corporeal or mental exercise, and is consequently likely to pass a sleepless night, he will be laid asleep by a dose of strong liquor. When the latter is not at hand, opium will supply its place. The want of the venereal gratification is relieved by wine, and the want of the latter is made amends for by the use of the former, each banishing the languor occasioned by the want of the other.²⁶

The next and final example describes the right cautious method of changing a patient's condition; here the theme of controlled deflation is reflected in a fine example of Brown's comic bathos:

²⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 27-28.

A famished person is not to be immediately gratified with a full meal; a person afflicted with long continued or excessive thirst is not immediately to be indulged with a large draught; but food should be given bit by bit, and drink drop by drop, then both of them by degrees more plentifully. A person benumbed with cold should be gradually warmed. A person in deep sorrow should have good news gradually communicated to him. The news of the safety of the Roman soldier, who survived the disaster of his countrymen at Cannæ, should have been communicated to his mother in a round-about way; at first as having no better foundation than doubtful report; then as being somewhat more than to be depended on; afterwards as being still more probable; then as not admitting a shadow of doubt: and last of all, before he was introduced, the mother should have been at the same time fortified, or had a part of her very abundant excitability taken off, by other stimuli, and a glass of Falernian wine.²⁷

The two existing cantos of *Nepenthe* announce that they represent pathological conditions of over- and under-excitement (the question remains whether the nature of this excitement is physiological or purely imaginative); Darley's stated intent was for a third canto to represent the healthy balance between sthenic and asthenic pathology. The heaping of drug upon drug in the form of waves of intensifying poetic vision results at first in the dreamer making an untimely plunge into the sea, from where his

²⁷ *ibid.*, pp. 30-31.

more melancholy journeys in Canto II take on a graver and more depressed character. This second stage is notable for the poet's interest in treating and curing the sickness of others; the best example is the freeing of Memnon with a mixed – not concentrated – opiate, strikingly similar to the growth of Keats's Endymion into a healer-poet, as he visits and ministers to forlorn tutelary figures in the symbolic landscape:

Memnon—the God of the blue River—the King
 Of the Endless Valley—whoever his Spirit
 Will free from earthly fetters, let him mingle
 A cup of darkness here with one of light,
 Fit opiate for Life's fever;
 And so be blest, pouring it on his brain.

This passage gives a strong demonstration that the poem's theme is at least partially grounded in the artistic representation of medical theory and practice. But ultimately *Nepenthe* is about the physician healing himself. The poem is littered with enraptured declarations of having found the nepenthe, which all turn out to be mistaken, desperate apostrophes to false panaceas. The true nepenthe is no drug but a condition of balance. Ambition is what has driven the poet on to seek the nepenthe; ambition is also the human failing in him, self-absorbed dissatisfaction, which causes him to need and to seek the nepenthe. His ambition drives him to seek a cure for his ambition. The poet's medical pursuit is also his very sickness, enclosing him in a vicious and self-defeating circle.

How, then, does this suggested context affect the inertia surrounding a minor reputation? The analogy with Brunonian theory is not exactly obscure but, to my knowledge at least, Darley's writing has not been re-read in the currently influential context of Romantic medicine. A parallel reading of Brown's pathology may be specific enough to be sustained as a working contextual setting to bring the poet out of his alleged burial in self. But can a little dose of historical context save the sinking or sunk fame of the poet-hero? It is an appealing prospect – that a sustainable enough context might be available, without the self-perpetuating habit of tinkering with and then assenting to the poet's debility of fame. But the result of the endeavour need not in fact be benign. For these materials could equally give rise to a melancholy narrative of reputation: even in this brief account I have portrayed a poem of ruinous and violent disequilibrium which still reaches no solution; a quest which fails to reach outside the exquisite personal vanity; an entrapping circular cycle of symptom and cure moving into and replacing one another. Anything along these lines would serve as an analogy (or worse – a metaphor) for the languishing of the reputation: the image of morbid physiological stasis might be transferred as a symbolic code for the stagnation of Darley's texts and reputation. The strategy is certainly possible, but is it admissible? Although I am writing in opposition to narratives of this kind, it is undeniably tempting to make the connection. The resemblance is pleasing and compelling. Like the poet-hero, the critic feels the pull of the enduring stagnant source.

But we can have little to gain from assenting to the maintenance of minority when the official line has it that the canon of Romanticism is undergoing radical change. If the canon is to be genuinely revised and revived, those authors presently in

its margins ought to be treated to their due reassessment in the light of the new paradigms through which we now view, for example, Hemans, Keats, and LEL. It may well be, however, that we do have something of a stake in the maintenance of defeat, and the upkeep of the severely defeated author as an endorsing reflection of the ‘major’ authors we are fond of revealing as fragmented, disfigured and generally problematic. This would partially account for the remarkable combination of silence and critical stasis in the case of one minor male author, George Darley, a fascinating poet in his own right who is presently suffering the indignity of being made a ‘case study’. Finally, I should reiterate that I have not been concerned with the ‘quality’ of Darley’s writing; my argument is not to champion him on grounds of neglected genius, but to enquire into the mechanisms of this neglect. The allegedly fine or allegedly poor quality of Darley’s writing is, as I have remarked, ‘another story’; it might be a refreshing corrective if someone were moved to write frankly of either his goodness or his badness (as Jack did a generation ago). Then, breaking free from the habit of apology, we might once again praise Darley. Alternatively, we might accord him some long-overdue respect by treating his work to the kind of sadistic critical mauling which he was quite ready to inflict on others in the pages of *The London Magazine* and *The Athenaeum*. Then the workings of canonicity might at least be overt and visible.