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The Power of Sound: Wordsworth's Poetry

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So all day long the noise of battle rolled.
Tennyson, *The Passing of Arthur*

I

Geoffrey Leech has found in Tennyson's line an onomatopoeic effect. He remarks that "the verb *rolled* here signifies a deep booming noise, as of the rolling of a drum or the rumbling of distant thunder."¹⁾ This he sees as sound symbolism and thinks the impression he has depends much on vocalic "sonority", which he defines as "a quality of vowels which tend to be pronounced with a wide passage between the tongue and the roof of the mouth, and with the back of the tongue higher than the front."²⁾ Thus, almost all the vowels in Tennyson's line are sonorous: "so, all, long, noise, rolled."

The device is never modern, but almost traditional; we easily find that the art is at least as old as the seventeenth century:

Let us roll all our strength, and all
Our sweetness, up into one ball:

Marvell, "To His Coy Mistress", 41-2.

Here is a mimicry of similar rumbling sounds. These lines have as much momentum as Tennyson's. The vocalic sonority of the passage endows the lines with an overwhelming force. Thus, the sounds of "roll" and "ball", together with the twice repeated "all", make an atmosphere in which

we have some urgent feeling of a climax.

There is another example in the same century from Milton. But Milton's sonorous vowels are more divine than merely mimetic:

To him with swift ascent he up returned,
 Into his blissful bosom reassumed
 In glory as of old, to him appeased
 All, though all-knowing, what had passed with man
 Recounted, mixing intercession sweet.

Milton, *Paradise Lost*, X, 224-8.

The author suggests the immanence of Deity with the repetition of sonorous vowels: "All, though all-knowing" rings so grave and so sublime that it subtly fits the description of the Omniscient. Perhaps the phrase partly characterizes Milton's grand style in terms of phonemic aspect.

All these examples remind us that the vowels /o:/ and /ou/ are notable for its sonority. It seems that many poets are often attracted by their expressive richness. E. A. Poe has explicitly confessed that he chose the sound *o* (so he wrote) for composing "The Raven." Poe says that the vowel is "the most sonorous" and that he likes the vowel "in connection with *r* as the most producible consonant."³⁾

Wordsworth is no exception, and this paper attempts to shed some light on Wordsworth's poetry from the phonemic viewpoint.⁴⁾ A careful reading will reveal that Wordsworth's poetry owes much of its power to the sonorous vowels /o:/ and /ou/⁵⁾, with the occasional occurrence of other similar sounds in the same context. Let us take for example that central passage of "Tintern Abbey":

A motion and a spirit, that impels
 All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
 And rolls through all things.⁶⁾ "Tintern Abbey", 101-3.

Wordsworth in such a passage signals a culminating point, where there comes a crucial moment of climax. Perhaps this is Marvell's resurrection; the repetition of "all", and "rolls", together with "motion", "objects" and "thought", make us feel that the passage derives from the ancestral version of the seventeenth century.

II

"Tintern Abbey" has its unique power that moves us. In its culminating passage Wordsworth's pantheism finds full expression. The passage begins with a loose syntax and rather abstract terms:

And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean, and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man,
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things. "Tintern Abbey", 94-103.

Apparently, this is an eloquent explanation of what he has felt from nature. But can we actually say that anything has been fully clarified by this eloquence? Does the language convey effectively the poet's philosophical argument? On the contrary, Wordsworth's language is rather abstract and elusive; the terms "presence" or "something" make us feel uneasy about what is going on in this passage, though we admit he is trying to express something inexpressible. The syntax also has a great problem as Empson has scrutinized:

It is not certain that what is *more deeply interfused* than what. It is not certain whether the *music of humanity* is the same as the *presence*; they are separated by the word *and* and a full stop. We may notice, too, that the word *in* seems to distinguish, though but faintly, the *mind of man* from the *light*, the *ocean*, the *air* and the *sky*; this tends to separate the *motion* and the *spirit* from the *presence* and the *something*; but they may, again, all be identical with the *music*.⁷⁾

The analysis concerns denomination. With all the poet's eloquence, "there is something rather shuffling about this attempt to be uplifting yet non-denominational."⁸⁾ It is not Empson alone who finds much difficulty in the grammar. Allan Rodway also traces contradictory ideas in this passage, saying that "what we have here is metaphysical rhetoric masquerading as shared experience."⁹⁾

F. R. Leavis blames Empson for his misquotations and serious mispunctuations, though he admits his analysis "in general effect sound enough."¹⁰⁾ But Leavis's own treatment of the passage seems to me rather problematic. He thinks that explanation is primarily important for poetry, and comments on the passage like this:

Wordsworth in such passages as are in question produces the mood, feeling or experience and at the same time appears to be giving an explanation of it.¹¹⁾

Another remark by Leavis on the passage shows that he is strongly involved in the idea that poetry is explanation:

. . . Wordsworth here is explaining how he comes to have the kind of experience he describes in *Tintern Abbey*.¹²⁾

The assumption that poetry is explanation derives probably from his notion that "the meaning must be in some sense clear at first reading"¹³⁾, so in a sense Leavis expects the

poem to be a kind of explanation. It is this assumption that Donald Davie seems to disagree with. Davie's opinion about one important characteristic of *The Prelude* is worth quoting here:

... the syntax of *The Prelude* is not doing what it offers to do. It seems to be explaining, while in fact it is meditating, ruminating, at all events *experiencing* more fully than one does when one explains. But I am not sure that Wordsworth even pretends to explain.¹⁴⁾

The same author disputes both Empson and Leavis:

Mr. Empson and Dr. Leavis, I suggest, were wrong to think that this poetry [*The Prelude*] aimed at even the effect of philosophic argument . . . this is the prelude to a philosophic poem, not the poem itself.¹⁵⁾

I think Bateson was right when he warned against such an extreme quest for logicity of "Tintern Abbey":

The apparent logical contradictions in "Tintern Abbey" must not be pressed so far.¹⁶⁾

It would be difficult, then, to ask the poem for explanation or argument of what Wordsworth has felt and experienced. What is remarkable is the fact that the poem still conveys some poetic power. Empson, who finds the lines "shuffling", confesses that he enjoys them very much. Rodway, who finds the lines "rhetoric masquerading", does not think it "spoils the balance of conflicts, the rich tension, characteristic of the poem as a whole."¹⁷⁾ It is important to note the fact that many critics love the poem in spite of its syntactic defect. Or we should say that many people do love it *because of*, not *in spite of*, the defect. So it is now time to ask what actually remains in "Tintern Abbey."

III

I think "Tintern Abbey" has its unique "uplifting" power with its vocalic sonority. The magnificence of the climactic passage, however defective its syntax, and however much ambiguity it has, owes much of its power to Wordsworth's use of sonorous vowels. We hear the sounds /o:/ and /ou/ toward the end of the culminating lines:

A motion and a spirit, that impels
 All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
 And rolls through all things. "Tintern Abbey", 101-3.

The climactic repetition of /o:/ in "all" finds its full manifestation when combined with other similar words that have /o:/ or /ou/: "motion", "thought", "rolls" and, perhaps "objects" (for the nonce included). Thus, the magnificent world of allness forms an urgently culminating impression on our mind. Indeed, the power is impelling.

There is an intermittent continuation of magnificence in the lines that follow:

Therefore am I still
 A lover of the meadows and the woods,
 And mountains; and of all that we behold
 From this green earth; of all the mighty world
 Of eye and ear, both what they half-create,
 And what perceive; well pleased to recognize
 In nature and the language of the sense,
 The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,
 The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul
 Of all my moral being. "Tintern Abbey", 103-12.

We find here the phrase "of all" three times repeated, among which the first and the last are both strengthened by the additional "behold", "soul" and "moral." With this I couple an analogous passage from *The Prelude*:

Thy gentle Spirit to my heart of hearts
 Did also find its way; and thus the life
 Of all things and the mighty unity
 In all which we behold, and feel, and are
 Admitted more habitually a mild
 Interposition, and closelier gathering thoughts
 Of man and his concerns, such as become
 A human Creature, be he who he may!¹⁸⁾

The Prelude, XIII, 245-52.

Not only do we find “of all” here, we also know the phrase “all which we behold” is parallel to “all that we behold” in “Tintern Abbey.” There is another yet case of Wordsworth’s powerful string of “all” :

Thus did my days pass on, and now at length
 From Nature and her overflowing soul
 I had receiv’d so much that all my thoughts
 Were steep’d in feeling; I was only then
 Contented when with bliss ineffable
 I felt the sentiment of Being spread
 O’er all that moves, and all that seemeth still,
 O’er all, that, lost beyond the reach of thought
 And human knowledge, to the human eye
 Invisible, yet liveth to the heart,
 O’er all that leaps, and runs, and shouts, and sings,
 Or beats the gladsome air, o’er all that glides
 Beneath the wave, yea, in the wave itself
 And mighty depth of waters.

The Prelude, II, 415-28.

Here the repetition of “o’er all” has equally much power. This is an immediate and powerful expression unique to Wordsworth.

In “Tintern Abbey” the climactic outburst of /o:/ and /ou/ shows how earnestly the poem asks us to listen to the sounds. It invites us to accept the sounds as they are without considering any logical coherence the language might

have. In this sense it is true that the syntax of "Tintern Abbey" is also not doing what it offers to do, but it wants to be listened to as music.¹⁹⁾ Apparently, Wordsworth is explaining his feeling in language, but while so doing, he seems to give us a chance to enjoy listening to the sonorous vowels as raw materials of language.

In the culminating passage of "Tintern Abbey", the climactic sounds /o:/ and /ou/ come to us, and there we feel as if we understood what he has really felt. But even so, our understanding is perhaps momentary, and it lasts only for a short time. Isn't it possible to say this hallucinatory power of "Tintern Abbey" comes from its vocalic sonority? In the central passage of the poem, the power of sound is most effectively enlisted when most needed. Sound offers power when explanation fails. Indeed, "Tintern Abbey" betrays our expectation of explanation, but even so, the poem has something that makes it poetic. The poem is a failure if we see it as a philosophical argument, and is a success if we listen to it.

IV

On a general basis it seems that the repetition of "all" almost schematizes Wordsworthian expression of his climactic feeling. In this connection, Leavis once mentioned his experience of reading the earlier version of *The Prelude*:

In one beloved presence, nay and more,
 In that most apprehensive habitude
 And those sensations which have been deriv'd
 From this beloved Presence, there exists
 A virtue which irradiates and exalts
 All objects through all intercourse of sense.

The Prelude, II, 255-60.

Notes

- 1) Geoffrey N. Leech, *A Linguistic Guide to English Poetry* (London: Longman, 1969), p. 99.
- 2) Leech, p.99.
- 3) E.A. Poe, "The Philosophy of Composition" in *Edgar Allan Poe: Essays and Reviews* (selected and annotated by G.R. Thompson) (New York: The Library of America, 1984), p. 18.
- 4) Interesting studies have already been launched on the phonemic aspect of Wordsworth's poetry. Wilson has analyzed the sound pattern of the boat-episode passage of *The Prelude* (Bk. I) and also of some other poems (Katharine M. Wilson, *Sound and Meaning in English Poetry* (Port Washington: Kennikat Press, 1930), pp. 278-284). Investigating Wordsworth's style, Murray refers us to the opening passage of "Tintern Abbey", where the long vowel /i:/ appears with significant frequency (Roger N. Murray, *Wordsworth's Style: Figures and Themes in the Lyrical Ballads of 1800* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1967), pp. 25-32). Following the Jakobsonian model, Nakagawa has scrutinized the sound pattern of Wordsworth's daffodil poem (Ken Nakagawa, "A Structural Analysis of Wordsworth's 'I wandered lonely as a cloud'", *Journal of Yasuda Women's University*, vol. 7 (1978), pp. 51-65). Ward maintains that Wordsworth's important works are full of nasals and sibilants (J.P. Ward, *Wordsworth's Language of Men* (New Jersey: Barnes & Noble Books, 1984), pp. 39-54). Lastly, a recent study by Haruhiko Fujii is remarkably stimulating, which analyzes the whole sound pattern of "A slumber did my spirit seal" (Haruhiko Fujii, "Meaning and sound in Wordsworth's 'A slumber did my spirit seal'", *Collected Essays in Celebration of the 60th Birthday of Professor Narita Yoshimitsu* (Tokyo: Eihosha, 1992), pp. 47-57).
- 5) Generally, English phonemics makes a clear distinction between /o:/ as in *all* and /ou/ as in *roll*. But Wordsworth has reportedly equated them. Darbishire maintains that Wordsworth has rhymed "notes" (pronounced as "nawts") with "thoughts", with a conclusive remark that "This pronunciation of *note* is corroborated by a letter of Wordsworth's where he expresses anxiety about another kind of note, a note for £20: 'If the nought should happen to be lost upon the road', he writes." (Helen Darbishire, *The Poet Wordsworth* (Oxford: Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1950), p. 9).

- 6) All quotations from Wordsworth's poetry refer to *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth* (5 vols)(ed. by E. de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire) (Oxford: Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1940-49).
- 7) William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (3rd ed.) (London: Chatto & Windus, 1977), p. 152.
- 8) Empson, p. 154.
- 9) Allan Rodway, *The Romantic Conflict* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1963), p. 151.
- 10) F.R. Leavis, *Revaluation: Tradition and Development in English Poetry* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972), p. 149.
- 11) Leavis, p. 149.
- 12) Leavis, p. 151.
- 13) Leavis, p. 151.
- 14) Donald Davie, *Articulate Energy: An Inquiry into the Syntax of English Poetry* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1955), p. 111.
- 15) Davie, p. 112.
- 16) F.W. Bateson, *Wordsworth: A Re-interpretation* (London: Longmans Green, 1965), p. 142.
- 17) Rodway, p. 151.
- 18) All references are to the version of 1805 unless otherwise stated.
- 19) To associate "Tintern Abbey" with music is never abrupt, for Wordsworth himself regards the poem as comparable to music, saying in the note to "Tintern Abbey" that "it was written with a hope that in the transitions and the impassioned music of the versification, would be found the principal requisites, of that species of composition." The comparison cannot be so easily dismissed as only metaphor, for it is generally accepted that "Romantic poetry oriented itself toward music" (Roman Jakobson, "The Dominant" in *Selected Writings: III Poetry of Grammar and Grammar of Poetry* (The Hague: Mouton Publishers, 1981), p. 752) and also that in the romantic period "music becomes the art frequently pointed to as having a profound affinity with poetry" (M.H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (London: Oxford University Press, 1953), p. 50). John Hollander's essay, "Wordsworth and the Music of Sound" in Harold Bloom (ed.), *William Wordsworth* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1985), pp. 55-80. is perhaps a particular response to the matter on the side of Wordsworthian criticism.
- 20) Leavis, p. 151.